

**Unsex'd Women: The Politics of Transgression
in the Poetry of Anna Lætitia Barbauld
and Charlotte Smith**

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Lancaster University

October 1998

By

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent revisions of Romanticism which seek to include women writers in that movement, the women poets writing at the end of the eighteenth century remain marginalised, both in our understanding of Romanticism and as literary figures in their own right. This is partly due to the problems which arise when seeking to fit a new group of writers into a previously constructed literary movement. Readings of women's poetry in relation to this movement have led to the construction of their work in terms of the defining 'Other' to male Romanticism, and as a consequence their poetry has been defined as primarily concerned with the domestic and the quotidian.

My thesis rejects the category of Romanticism as a means by which we can understand late eighteenth century women poets and situates their work in a much more complex network of cultural, social, philosophical and political discourses. It takes two women poets of the period, Anna Barbauld and Charlotte Smith and focuses on their much neglected political poetry, in order to demonstrate the ways in which these women writers themselves challenged the expectations about the poetry women should write and transgressed into the public sphere. It takes as its starting point the contemporary criticism levelled at these women, that they had 'unsex'd' themselves by their repeated transgressions into the political.

In rejecting essentialist constructions of late eighteenth century women's poetry and focusing on Barbauld and Smith's transgressive interventions in politics, this thesis argues that the poems respond to the debates on women's rights which mark the

period, and which led to the production of the seminal feminist polemic, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, by Mary Wollstonecraft. In placing Barbauld and Smith's poetry in the context of this turbulent and exciting moment of gendered political awareness, I offer a revisionist reading of their poetry, as not only highly politicised, but invested with an early feminist agenda.

An introductory chapter sets up the critical tools which the readings of individual poems use: a rigorous historical contextualisation combined with attention to textual nuance and meaning in the poems at the level of language and imagery. This is followed by a biographical/introductory chapter on Barbauld (Chapter One) and three subsequent chapters which offer readings of individual poems by Barbauld (Chapters Two to Four). Chapter Five is a biographical/introductory chapter on Smith, and again this is followed by three chapters which offer readings of individual poems by Smith (Chapters Six to Eight). In both cases the three chapters which offer readings of the poetry follow a historical trajectory, looking at early poems, then poems produced in the radical years of the 1790s and finally at the poems written in the early years of the nineteenth century. In following this shared trajectory the thesis raises questions of both difference and shared agenda between Barbauld and Smith, and the conclusion offers a comparative assessment of their poetry in terms of radicalism and feminism.

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Introduction

Overview

Despite recent revisions of Romanticism which seek to include women writers within that movement, the women poets writing at the end of the eighteenth century remain marginalised figures, both in our understanding of Romanticism and as literary figures in their own right. This is partly due to the problems which arise when seeking to fit a new group of writers into a previously constructed literary movement, problems which are exacerbated when the 'new' writers are women and the movement has largely been constructed through literature and criticism written by men. The general aim of this thesis is to find a strategy of reading the poetry written by women in the latter years of the eighteenth century, both in terms of critical and literary positioning, which does not continue to marginalise their work. I am concerned with re-positioning these women in the literary space within which they wrote, the mainstream of literary culture. In order to establish a sense of women writers of this period as individuals but also to raise questions of difference, I examine in detail the work of two women poets: Anna Lætitia Barbauld (1743-1825) and Charlotte Smith (1749-1806). The thesis aims to demonstrate both the differences between the poetry produced by these two women and also the similarities, in particular, the refusal by both to be restrained by the pressure on women in the eighteenth century not to write politically. Both women juggled the image of the respectable 'feminine' lady writer with their desire to insert themselves in the public discourses and political debates of the day.

At the present time, although new anthologies are appearing to challenge the construction, these two women are generally perceived as writers of sentimental, quotidian, and clichéd verse. Yet both were perceived as 'Amazonian' revolutionaries by the Reverend Richard Polwhele in his now infamous poetic diatribe, *The Unsex'd Females*, and aligned with Wollstonecraftian feminism because of their transgressions into the public world of politics.¹ This contemporary alignment with the feminist figure Wollstonecraft is the starting point for my thesis. I examine the ways in which Barbauld and Smith respond in their poetry to the same set of historical events, intellectual questioning, and turbulent politics as Wollstonecraft,

and look at the ways in which they repeatedly deconstruct their own self-constructed images of 'proper' lady writers by their transgressions into the public sphere.

Ways of Approaching Late Eighteenth Century Women's Writing

I want firstly to set out a discussion of some of the key critical readings of women's poetry of this period, and secondly to illustrate the ways in which my own approach will differ from and interact with these. I will point out what I see to be the limitations for future study of the approaches of critics who have been crucial in bringing this body of literature to the forefront of academic discussion in the last twenty years, and turn to some of the diverse, smaller projects by lesser known critics whose more recent work has suggested new approaches and ideas. The key commentators on women's poetry of the late eighteenth century have emerged from the academic school of Romantic studies. Stuart Curran, Anne K. Mellor, Margaret Homans and Marlon Ross, all seek to position these newly discovered women writers within the discourses of Romanticism and deploy various strategies of interpreting the writing of Anna Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Ann Yearsley, Mary Robinson, Felicia Hemans and others, within that discursive framework. I want to suggest initially what I see to be the fundamental problems with this enterprise in itself.

Margaret Homans' *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (1980) has remained for nearly two decades one of the key interpretative texts in understanding women's poetry in relation to Romanticism. She offers a persuasive Lacanian reading of male Romantic tradition as the symbolic discourse against which three women poets, Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson, struggle to identify themselves as poets and write. My fundamental critique of her project is that it is a negative one; her psychoanalytic reading demonstrates so convincingly how and why women poets cannot write within that tradition that it allows little room for understanding those who did. Homans takes as her starting point the male Romantic poets' construction of the poetic voice as transcendental, which she argues always already excludes the woman poet, but in choosing this as her model Homans continues to collude with the Romantic male poets' rhetoric. She excludes social or political poetry, suggesting that only novels function in such a way that the writers'

'experience in society' is relevant; for poets, literary tradition is seen as the determining factor.² The only late eighteenth century poet Homans looks at is Dorothy Wordsworth, a woman who did not consider herself a poet, who never published anything under her own name, and who was herself closely circumscribed by the familial relationship with her poet brother. Homans' theory is fundamentally challenged when applied to women like Barbauld and Smith who wrote and published confidently as poets, working apparently comfortably within a masculine poetic tradition, and who actually contributed to the formation of the Romantic ideology as we now know it by influencing the young male Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Homans' theory, while clever and persuasive in its context, offers little help in understanding in a positive way the hundreds of women poets writing and publishing at the end of the eighteenth century.

The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry (1989) by Marlon Ross raises some important points about the criteria behind choosing certain women poets for study and not others, which questions the choices made by Homans in her reading. He argues against the early tendency to include Mary Shelley and Dorothy Wordsworth as token women writers, suggesting that 'romanticist critics have made women writers of the period an extension of male romanticism' and that such tactics excuse us 'from confronting the reality of one of the most important literary phenomena of British literary history, the rise of women's poetry toward the end of the eighteenth century'.³ Ross usefully argues that '[w]e must seek to place romanticism within history' and 'ask how the romantics fit within a larger historical, literary, and cultural context' (Ross, p. 5). These it seems to me are indeed important questions and ideas, and Ross does to some extent succeed in positioning male Romanticism within a network of other discourses, in particular in relation to Augustan poetics. But, once again, the axis upon which the argument spins is 'masculine desire', the male Romantic poets' construction of themselves and the 'invisible machinery of desire that fuels its [male Romanticism] efficiently operating properly' (p. 7). While Ross announces his aim to 'move outside of Romantic ideology' (p. 5) he demonstrates that he himself is firmly locked within that ideology when he employs terms like 'Augustan scribbler' and 'sentimental poetess' to define women poets of the period (p. 12). Moreover, he avoids looking

at the poetry of women who don't fit into and who would therefore challenge his generalising categories, such as Mary Robinson and Helen Maria Williams.

Anne K. Mellor's relatively recent *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) usefully questions the idea that women can be fitted into the Romantic ideology as we understand it, and seeks to construct a 'Feminine Romanticism' running concurrently with what she terms 'Masculine Romanticism'. One of the main problems with this argument is hinted at by Mellor herself in the preface to the book, and that is the necessary re-enforcement of binary oppositions. Although these two categories do not necessarily conform to the dichotomy of literature written by men and literature written by women, this is mostly shown to be the case, and inevitably 'Feminine Romanticism' is defined against an already formulated 'Masculine Romanticism'. The consequence of this is that 'Feminine Romanticism' comes to be constructed as all that 'Masculine Romanticism' is not and focuses, we are told, on 'very different issues from those which concerned the canonical male poets'.⁴ This poetry is defined as predominantly domestic, quotidian and earthbound, a poetics of the everyday which emphasises community and eschews the transcendental Romantic 'I'. Although Mellor herself describes her book as only an initial exploratory mapping of this new literary terrain and therefore guilty of some generalising, this construction of a domestic earthbound version of Romanticism produced by women writers of this period has stuck and has proved damaging to the inclusion of women writers in a mainstream sense ever since.

Although the critical works by Homans, Ross, and Mellor have all been crucial in bringing about wider academic discussion of the poetry written by women in the late eighteenth century, they remain unsatisfactory as a means of interpreting the vast wealth of poetry written by women at this time in a way that offers a positive understanding of that work. I want to set out here the three crucial ways in which my approach to reading the poetry of late eighteenth century women poets differs from these models and to explore the reasons firstly for my rejection of Romanticism as a useful category of analysis, secondly my discussion of two writers rather than a group, and thirdly, my focus on the political aspects of the poetry written by these women. All of these features of my project are in some sense a

reaction to what I perceive to be the problems of the key critical approaches deployed by Mellor, Homans and Ross. The works by these three critics all offer comparative readings of women's poetry with that of a group of male Romantic poets who were writing at the same time. This strategy, I want to argue, continues to marginalise women's poetry by defining it against previously established male criteria. In her gynocritical model of feminist literary analysis, Elaine Showalter warns against the dangers of 'trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition' and suggests that we should 'focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture', and 'construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature'.⁵ In relation to the discourse of Romanticism this is a particularly pressing enterprise since Romantic ideology still threatens to outlast and overwhelm any challenges to its authority. Harriet Kramer Linkin, in an essay discussing the difficulties of teaching the newly discovered women poets of this period, describes the problem of using the 'comparativist mode' of analysis in terms of the 'standard of measurement used and the implicit danger of imposing a critical judgement shaped by a received Romantic ideology that only rediscovered the seemingly lesser aesthetic value of the woman poet', and this suggests a need to stand outside Romantic ideology as much as possible when looking critically at these women poets.⁶

Most of the new anthologies of late eighteenth century women's writing collude with the enterprise of locating the newly discovered women poets within the confines of the Romantic movement.⁷ As this strategy of placing relatively recently re-discovered women poets within the canonised - in some academic circles almost deified - retrospectively constructed movement of Romanticism, frequently serves to confirm the marginal status of this poetry, my thesis rejects Romanticism as a category of interpretation. Neither do I want to accept the construction of this poetry as a literary bridge between Augustan and Romantic poetics. Instead of sandwiching the poetry of Barbauld and Smith between these two literary movements as we perceive them, I seek to place it within a far more complex and specific network of literary, cultural, social, and political contexts, and in doing so to position their work far more accurately within the discursive moment in which it was produced.⁸

The reasons for my examining the poetry of only two women poets of the period as opposed to a group, is again a reaction away from the comparative model which has a tendency to perceive these women poets as a barely differentiated collective. In place of this I would propose an approach which looks at each re-discovered writer individually. Although late eighteenth century women writers are now making tentative appearances on literary courses of the period, this construction of them as a collective has filtered down to academic teaching and late eighteenth century women poets frequently appear on Romanticism modules as a group, with a week on 'Women's Poetry' being placed between the study of individual male poets.⁹ This strategy perpetuates the Romantic male poet's construction of woman as 'Other', that against which he defines his own poetic self. In an essay offering a feminist reading of Foucault and power, Nancy Hartsock discusses the purpose of this construction of the colonised 'Other'. She writes that 'the philosophical and historical creation of a devalued "Other" was the necessary precondition for the creation of the transcendental rational subject outside of time and space, the subject who is the speaker in Enlightenment philosophy', and supremely the male Romantic poet.¹⁰ Hartsock refers to Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* to point to the effects of this artificial construction. Memmi argues that 'the Others are not seen as fellow individual members of the human community, but rather as part of a chaotic, disorganized, and anonymous collectivity' and carry 'the mark of the plural'; in 'more colloquial terms, they all look alike' (Memmi cited in Hartsock, pp. 160-1).

Although texts and teaching courses on women poets as a group are useful primarily in mapping out the territory of this writing, this strategy continues to validate the Romantic ideology of the individual male poets - Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Keats - and to perpetuate the construction of the 'Other', the nameless women poets against which they are defined. To undermine this construction of the women poets writing at this time as 'Other' it is necessary to look at them individually and closely, marking the differences between their writings and in doing so, denying the perception of their work in terms of plurality and sameness. In making a full length study of two individual poets from the late eighteenth century, this thesis attempts to challenge the ideology implicit in the early critical models of analysis and in the structuring of Romanticism courses which

allows only one week to study 'Women's Poetry', but also in the plethora of new anthologies of 'Romantic Women Poets' and the parallel dearth of scholarly editions of individual poets. To challenge the assumptions that lie behind these projects it is necessary to focus on individual women writers in some depth and to make claims for their differences, and significance as individual poets in their own right.

A third problem which arises from the recent critical constructions of late eighteenth century women poets is again a consequence of defining them *against* male Romanticism. This is the tendency, already noted in Mellor's work, to view their poetry largely in terms of its emphasis on the domestic and quotidian, community and caring. A critique of this definition has recently been put forward by Duncan Wu in the introduction to his anthology, *Romantic Women Poets* (1997). Wu argues that critics like Mellor who distinguish between 'male and female romanticisms, the former epitomised by the sublime excursions of Wordsworth, the latter associated with reason, practicality, and such concepts as duty and domestic affection', actually replicate the same line put forward by the contemporary male critics of these women.¹¹ He argues that while 'the jargon has changed; the substance remains the same', and suggests that this approach 'both relegates the feminine to a second division category....and distorts our understanding of what women writers were trying to achieve' (Wu, p. xxiii). Although there is much to be said for the feminist enterprise of validating the domestic and the everyday as a proper subject for art, the enterprise is not without its problems. As Ann Rosalind Jones notes, in offering a similar critique of the French 'feminist' validation of women's madness, '[t]here is nothing liberatory....in women's claiming as virtues qualities that men have always found convenient'.¹² To limit our understanding of women's poetry of the period to the domestic and quotidian is dangerous in that it merely serves to replicate the categories already assigned to women.

To perceive all women's writing of the period in terms of a focus on the domestic is moreover offering a misleading and distorted perception of their work. They themselves were aware that such subject matter was expected of women writers but rose to challenge this expectation, often using their poetry to discuss openly the political issues of the day. Both Barbauld and Smith wrote a great deal of poetry

which speaks out on key public events such as the French Revolution, the colonisation of Corsica by the French, the abolition of slavery debate, poverty, and the Napoleonic wars, all which challenges perceptions of these women as poets of the quotidian. Wu notes that in the case of Felicia Hemans, who is portrayed by Mellor in terms of the domestic ideology, the 'concept cannot accommodate such important aspects of her poetic identity as her Welsh nationalism and serious interest in world history' (Wu, p. xxiii). The same problem with Mellor's construction of women's poetry occurs with Barbauld and Smith; their political interests remain in excess of Mellor's account of 'feminine Romanticism'. For example, in her conclusion, Mellor writes that 'feminine Romanticism opposed violent military revolutions, especially the French Revolution' (Mellor, p. 209), a statement which is problematised by Barbauld's continued support of that revolution despite its increasing violence. Although Barbauld would on other occasions speak out against warmongering and militarism, she also defended extremely bloody and violent actions when these were undertaken in the name of freedom. Her agenda is much more problematic and complex than any assessment of her as writing in a feminine domestic ideology can convey.

Such interventions into parliamentary debates and matters of national government policy however, do not represent the full extent of women's political involvement at this time, and to understand this we need to come to terms with the implications of the complex and fraught notion of the 'political' in this period. My use of the term 'politics' is obviously crucial to the overall argument of this thesis and is intended to be understood in the context of the eighteenth century division of social life into public and private spheres. I want to argue that for women to write poetry which addresses public issues is transgressive and becomes in itself a political gesture. To understand the implications of such transgression we only have to look at some of the guidelines and rules laid out in eighteenth century rhetoric for the separation of the two spheres. This kind of ideological division is viewed by social anthropologists as just as real as physical territorial demarcation. In *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps*, Shirley Ardener argues that societies divide the 'social into spheres, levels and territories with invisible fences and platforms to be scaled by abstract ladders and crossed by intangible bridges with as much trepidation or exultation as

on a plank over a raging torrent'.¹³ Such crossings are profoundly politicised since they implicitly question the rules and boundaries which society has established.

Although some critics have questioned the extent to which the public/private binarism dominated eighteenth century thinking, most commentators of the period agree that there is a 'rhetoric of separate spheres pervading Georgian and Victorian' thinking, and that this was divided along gender lines.¹⁴ The demarcation between the separate spheres was clearly enunciated by cultural commentators during the early years of the century; on one occasion in *The Spectator*, Addison writes:

the utmost of a Woman's Character is contained in domestick Life; she is Blameable or Praiseworthy according as her Carriage affects the House of her Father or her Husband. All she has to do in this World, is contained within the Duties of a Daughter, a Sister, a Wife, and a Mother[.]¹⁵

While a woman's role in life is clearly laid out for her here, that this sphere of activity is given over to women to the exclusion of another is also made clear: 'I think it....absolutely necessary to keep up the Partition between the two Sexes, and to take Notice of the smallest Encroachments which the one makes upon the other' (*The Spectator*, p. 347).

The political resonances of transgressing these invisible boundaries and so questioning the status quo become more serious in the late eighteenth century with the threat of revolution hanging over Europe. At this time the boundaries between the public and private spheres were policed more vigorously, and transgressions publicly punished. The closer the transgressions were to the revolutionary turmoil the more violent was the punishment meted out. The French Revolutionary leader, Chaumette, used the occasion of the execution of the feminist radical Olympe de Gouges to give out a warning to all women: 'Remember that virago, that woman-man...., the impudent Olympe de Gouges, who abandoned all the cares of her household because she wanted to engage in politics and commit crimes....This forgetfulness of her sex led her to the scaffold'.¹⁶ Chaumette makes clear that the division of social life between the public spheres is not an arbitrary division but rather is biologically determined:

Since when is it permitted to give up one's sex? Since when is it decent to see women abandoning the pious cares of their households, the cribs of their children, to come to public places, to harangues in the galleries, at the bar of the senate? Is it to men that nature confided domestic cares? Has she given us breasts to breast-feed our children?¹⁷

This emphasis on the transgression of boundaries as a violation of natural gender roles is echoed in Britain by conservative writers like T. J. Matthias and Richard Polwhele, who use the term 'Unsex'd' to describe women writers who cross over into the public sphere in their writing. Despite the criticism to which it left them open, Barbauld and Smith continued to perform political transgressions by venturing into the public sphere in their poetry, sometimes overtly critiquing parliamentary decisions - as in the debate on the abolition of the slave trade - on other occasions more subtly questioning Enlightenment debates on commerce and colonialism. It is to these poems that this thesis turns: the occasions on which Barbauld and Smith reject the sphere of the private and the domestic in their writing, and inscribe themselves into the public world.

In most previous studies of late eighteenth century women's poetry the question of politics has been ignored or sidelined, and this is perhaps attributable to the continued philosophical denial of women's involvement in politics. Hélène Cixous argues that women's writing and experience is viewed as 'body',

[a]s if she were destined - in the distribution established by men (separated from the world where cultural exchanges are made and kept in the wings of the social stage when it is a case of History) - to be the nonsocial, nonpolitical, nonhuman half of the living structure. On nature's side of this structure, of course, tirelessly listening to what goes on inside - inside her belly, inside her 'house.' In direct contact with her appetites, her affects.

And, whereas he takes...the risk and responsibility of being an agent, a bit of the public scene where transformations are played out, she represents indifference or resistance to this active tempo; she is the principle of consistency, always somehow the same, everyday and eternal.¹⁸

In the face of this denial of the political, what strikes me as most interesting about the women writing at the end of the eighteenth century, is that they became increasingly aware that the arena where 'transformations are played out', the 'public scene', was one of which they wanted to be a part, and while at that period the boundaries between the public and private were more aggressively policed than ever before, many women engaged in repeated, almost insistent transgressions into that arena. It seems ironic that the aspect of their writing which is focused on by late twentieth century critics is that which confirms their relegation to the private sphere, rather than the ways in which they themselves challenged and refused this exclusion.

As my glance at the ideology of the separate spheres in eighteenth century Britain shows, this spatial demarcation was deeply tied up with definitions of sex and consequently, the 'politics' of the period is skewed by questions of gender. The historian Paul Langford refers to the 'stormy sexual politics' of late eighteenth century and this seems a useful term for representing the complex relationship between gender issues and political debates during the period.¹⁹ The term is multilayered, suggestive not only of the unequal power relationships between men and women at this time, but also the growing awareness of this inequality and the conflicts such an awareness generates. Sex roles and difference became a site of political conflict, with women's exclusion from the public sphere and their transgressions into it, causing much public debate. The result of this seems to be that in its discussion of political issues, women's writing often has a gendered subtext, which comes across in the imagery and language of the poem, and which functions to disturb the poem's overt surface meaning. This connection between wider political issues and gender debates has profound implications for our understanding of their writing, it means for example that when late eighteenth century women compare their situation to that of African slaves, either overtly or in the subtext to poems, and then campaign for the rights of slaves, they are in effect campaigning for their own rights as well.

In focusing then on the political, this thesis also relates the poetry of Anna Barbauld and Charlotte Smith much more closely to the questions of women's rights raised by Mary Wollstonecraft. By situating these poets within the same set of discourses to

which Wollstonecraft was responding and in relation to which, her feminist polemic, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, emerged, a much more complex awareness of the different kinds of feminist response being put forward by women at this time is achieved. In such a context it is possible to argue that on issues such as the questioning of women's intellectual inferiority and their exclusion from the public sphere, Barbauld and Smith are not positioned in reaction to Wollstonecraft, but rather, are closely aligned with her. As Stuart Curran notes in his overview of women's contributions to literature at this time, 'Women Readers, Women Writers':

The 1790s in Britain form the arena for the first concerted expression of feminist thought in modern European culture....But Mary Wollstonecraft was by no means the only prescient vindicator of women's rights, and the scope of agitation and its underlying cultural dynamics during this decade have yet to be fully understood.²⁰

A number of recent articles have responded to this argument and have suggested that the intricacies of feminist thinking at this time are far more complex than had been previously supposed.

Critics working with late eighteenth century writers have formulated an increasingly complex and sophisticated understanding of the different kinds of 'feminism' perceivable at this time, and have argued that our understanding of what constitutes an eighteenth century feminist awareness has been too limited and perhaps too much influenced by late twentieth century models of feminism. Gary Kelly in 'Revolutionary and Romantic Feminism: Women, Writing, and Cultural Revolution', connects the development in feminist thought to a middle-class revolution which took as its main objective the feminisation of culture in order to grant women power, but he makes clear that this is not 'feminism as we now understand it'.²¹ Kelly identifies two kinds of feminism at this time, 'Romantic feminism' and 'Revolutionary feminism', and while distinguishing between the two he maintains that both are engaged in a project of granting women more power. Mitzi Myers has written several essays on Hannah More which attempt to orientate 'the reader to the representational strategies and power politics of an unfamiliar historical site' and in doing so to suggest that by validating the domestic realm as a source of authority, More works actively towards empowering women (Myers, p. 227).²² Another

challenging argument, which seeks to widen our perceptions of the extent of feminist activity at this time, is offered by Kathryn Sunderland in 'Hannah More's Counter-Revolutionary Feminism'. She argues that late twentieth century feminists have privileged Wollstonecraft's model of left-wing feminism over that expressed by more conservative writers, and seeks

to recover for contemporary feminist debate....a greater sense of the variety of ways in which women in periods of national crisis, like the 1790s, will treaty with or attempt to exploit the inevitable re-negotiation of the apparently fixed public/private, male/female division which underpins the political and economic model of society.²³

Sunderland usefully advocates that we pay attention to the 'range of women's legitimate responses in history to situations of male oppression' (Sunderland, p. 27).

It is perhaps an increasing awareness of the divisions within late twentieth century feminist thought, along the lines of race, class and other differences, which has led to this subtle re-alignment of thinking about eighteenth century feminism. In my situating Barbauld and Smith's poetry within a complex network of often gendered and politically motivated discourses, it is possible to see ways in which their writing is feminist in an eighteenth century context. In particular, like other women writing at this time, they challenge in a variety of subtle and complex ways key aspects of women's oppression, and advocate a greater degree of intellectual and public participation for their sex. Clearly Wollstonecraft did not write in an intellectual and political vacuum. Her *Vindication* emerges out of a very specific historical moment and one to which both Barbauld and Smith belong. This thesis aims to position these two women writers not in relation to Augustan or Romantic writing, but within the same heady nexus of political questions about human rights and definitions of gender which produced the first sustained feminist polemic.

Other recent critical developments in the study of women's writing of the period which this thesis seeks to challenge, include a tendency to focus on fiction rather than poetry, perhaps an early consequence of the negative conclusions drawn by Ross, Homans and Mellor about eighteenth century women writing poetry. As the 'high genre' of writing, women in the eighteenth century were discouraged one way

or another from writing poetry. This leads Mellor to argue that the 'leading women poets' of the period (a list in which she includes Barbauld and Smith) 'preferred to write odes, romances, ballads, shorter verse narratives, sonnets, "occasional verse," and nursery rhymes' (Mellor, p. 20). Janet Todd takes a similar line in *The Sign Of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction 1660-1800* (1989) which examines many radical possibilities in novel writing by women of the period but rejects poetry since, as she notes, women 'did not lay claim to the prophetic voice or to a visionary mode'.²⁴ Both statements are symptomatic of the critical blindness to the 'high' poetry of the period which women did write. Barbauld and Smith wrote a great deal of sonnets and 'occasional verse', but then so did Wordsworth. They also produced much more extended, intellectually sustained works. In anthologies of male Romantic poetry however, the selections on Wordsworth emphasise his longer, intellectually rigorous works, while as Greg Kucich notes in his essay 'Gendering the Canons of Romanticism: Past and Present', in recent anthologies of women's poetry of the period the opposite is true, their longer works are generally abbreviated or excluded in favour of their shorter, less immediately impressive verses.²⁵ This tendency, he argues, harks back to earlier traditions of anthologising women's poetry which have always excluded the 'longer, intellectually or imaginatively substantial' works by women poets (Kucich, p. 100). Such an exclusion is further re-enforced by critical readings which emphasise the domestic and minor aspects of their poetry.

In focusing on the political poetry written by these women this thesis seeks to counter such constructions of these women poets as writers of insignificant, sentimental, domestic, easily assimilable verse. I examine instead precisely that poetic voice which has been denied them, one which is intellectual, clever, witty, prophetic and authoritative, and which addresses the significant political issues of the day. Poetry is itself a suitable genre for a focus on the political since as Cora Kaplan notes, in an essay which examines 'women's poetry as part of an investigation of women's use of high language, that is, the language, public, political and literary, of patriarchal societies', '[p]oetry is a privileged metalanguage in western patriarchal societies'.²⁶ Poetry is seen to function in a political way in western literary discourse, and this role of poetry as a 'metalanguage' was never more significant than in the latter years of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth. Stuart

Curran writes in 'Romantic Poetry: Why and Wherefore?', that '[p]oetry mattered to this age in a way that it has never mattered since' and it 'mattered in a political, a social realm'.²⁷ Given this, we should be aware that in writing not only poetry but in writing overtly political poetry, Barbauld and Smith perform a double transgression, and one for which they were attacked by the male reviewers. Both of these women wrote confidently and intelligently in a genre and arena which was ideologically denied them as women. It is an investigation of this writing which this thesis takes as its central focus.

How We Read Late Eighteenth Century Women's Poetry: Recent Models and My Theoretical Approach

In recent years a number of articles have appeared in which critics have begun to work on the poetry produced by eighteenth century women writers, and thus the lengthy task of looking at these women individually has already begun. Many of these critics, in looking at the specificities of an individual woman's poetry, often implicitly question the generalisations made by Ross, Mellor and Homans. Some of these projects interact with my own and others I would distinguish my own work from, in terms of my focus on the political and my rejection of Romanticism and neo-classicism as categories of analysis. A key question which occupies a central place in studies of late eighteenth century women poets is how to read their work, or to put it another way, with what critical and theoretical tools we should approach their writing. A number of feminist critics working in this field have expressed concern that our tools of analysis have been developed for a tradition of writing by men and that these may function to further exclude and legitimate the marginalisation of women poets. Janet Todd faces a similar problem when encountering the novels written by women in this period, since '[b]y traditional literary critical standards most are intrusively autobiographical, self-indulgent, and conventional in style'; asking what this judgement implies, Todd suggests that it is partly a consequence of the fact that 'our critical assumptions have been fashioned through a particular body of male literature and literary criticism' (Todd [1989], p. 6).

The problem of reading this newly emergent body of literature by women has more recently been addressed by Isobel Armstrong in an essay entitled 'The Gush of the

Feminine: How Can We Read Women's Poetry of the Romantic Period?', in which she argues that

We have had two hundred years to discover a discourse of and strategies for reading male poets. They belong to a debate, a dialectic; we know how to think about politics, epistemology, power and language, in productive ways that....make these poets *mean* for us. A hermeneutics has evolved. Not so with the female poets. We are discovering who they are, but there are few ways of talking about them.²⁸

In what follows I discuss some of the practical ways in which women's writing of this period has been approached in recent years by critics including Todd, Armstrong and others, in order to situate my own discussion of these poets within this critical network.

To begin I want to problematise psychoanalytic models as methods of analysis, in particular much French 'feminist' and Lacanian criticism, drawing on two key texts as criticisms of these methods in relation to this body of literature: Janet Todd's *Feminist Literary History* and Marilyn Williamson's article 'Towards a Feminist Literary History'.²⁹ Although both texts are now over a decade old, they remain relevant to a discussion of texts which are still relatively unknown. The Lacanian psychoanalytic model and the French 'feminist' theories which derive from it, have proved to be extremely fashionable critical tools, taking on, as Todd suggests, in some intellectual circles a quasi-religious status, 'seemingly as complete as the hold of Christianity in the Middle Ages' (Todd [1988], p. 14), and it is right to remain academically suspicious of any theoretical model which functions as a metadiscourse in this way. More specifically I want to suggest that these models are limited in the contribution that they can make to the interpretation of women's poetry of the late eighteenth century.

One of the key influential critics on the study of this body of literature is Margaret Homans, whose work, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, which I discussed in the last section, deploys Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis as interpreted by the work of Nancy Chodorow, as the critical models for her analysis. As I suggested, her approach is a negative one and this is largely because, according to Lacan, women are excluded from symbolic discourse - which Homans equates with the male literary

tradition - and so their failure is pre-determined. Both Todd and Williamson critique Homans' use of the psychoanalytic model for similar reasons: Todd writes that '[t]here is....a sense of determinism conveyed by the method of arguing' (Todd [1988], p. 71) and Williamson describes Homans' approach as seeking 'an explanation for women's failure to write good poetry' and yet '[a]ccording to this model, women must fail' (Williamson, p. 138 and p. 139). For both Todd and Williamson the primary problem built in to Lacanian psychoanalytic models is their projection of a timeless model of human experience which allows no room for historical change.

There is an ongoing feminist critique of the politics of dense and complicated theoretical models, usually written by men, taking precedence over and being imposed on, texts written by women. In 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' Elaine Showalter argues that 'Literary science, in its manic generation of difficult terminology....creates an elite corps of specialists who spend more and more time mastering the theory, less and less time reading the books' (Showalter, p. 140). This is a particularly crucial point when we are addressing the question of texts that have hardly yet been 'read' at all. To swamp with complex theory, texts which have barely emerged back into our literary and academic consciousness seems dangerous and problematic. As I have suggested there is a risk in seeing women poets as a group and negating differences between them in terms of class, geographical positioning, biography, and particular historical moment; the Lacanian psychoanalytic model works against the project of differentiation with 'the grid of modern psychoanalysis' being 'placed on women' so that 'individual experience becomes universal drama' (Todd [1988], p. 71). Individual specificity is once again lost in the Lacanian narrative and this confirms the status of these women poets as 'Other'. Moreover, in the Lacanian model, women become 'woman' the sign. Like Todd and other feminist critics I would want to recover '[w]omen....in history as material entities' (Todd [1988], p. 84) not just as signifiers in language, and although lived experience as women does not mediate unproblematically through language, especially poetic language, I would suggest that a study which performs a historical embedding and which looks at the specificities of the discourses and ideology in

which a particular poet wrote, is a more fruitful way of approaching these poets than a timeless study of language.

Other problems emerge with Lacanian theories as they have been interpreted and appropriated by the French ‘feminist’ critics. Again these are unhelpful when turning to women’s writing which has been written in the past. According to Cixous, ‘with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity’, and this is clearly problematic when turning to the vast body of literature written by women two hundred years ago.³⁰ Williamson notes that ‘[i]n their hope for the future, these critics tend to deprive women of their past’ (Williamson, p. 139), and in a crucial sense the French ‘feminist’ project is at odds with my feminist project which seeks to recover that past and re-inscribe it in literary history. For the French ‘feminists’ I am continuing to collude with phallocentric discourse, since the women poets I am studying can only write in and therefore reaffirm the symbolic. Todd argues that in French ‘feminist’ thought the ‘concentration on women’s writing that cannot be written wipes out any concern for what can and has’ (Todd [1988], p. 78), and this in effect denies the vast wealth of literature written by women in the past.

A number of recent critics working at the level of interpreting and understanding this body of literature have emphasised the necessity of a socio-historical embedding of the women’s work. Marilyn Williamson calls for ‘the accumulation of substantial knowledge of the sociohistorical, ideological contexts in which women’s writing has taken place’ (Williamson, p. 140), particularly in relation to non-canonical texts, and Janet Todd, who employs this approach in her own work on Mary Wollstonecraft and other women writing at this time, advocates what she terms a ‘Feminist Literary History’, which she is careful to distinguish from the sometimes naïve, often generalising Anglo-American historical approach adopted by Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar, and others. She describes ‘Feminist Literary History’ in terms of its focus on the ‘subject of women in history’, on

women who wrote in history and who, ideologically marked and muzzled no doubt, nevertheless wrote with a voice that has never been sufficiently attended to. I should like to urge a kind of historically

specific, archival, ideologically aware but still empirically based enterprise, using a specific sense of genre as well as notions of changing female experience. (Todd [1988], pp. 6-7)

This approach has permeated down through a number of collections of essays on women's writing of the period. Some, like *History, Gender and the Eighteenth Century* (1994), edited by Beth Fowkes Tobin, are collected under the shared assumption 'that an understanding of the economic, political, and cultural circumstances of women's and men's lived experience is vital to the task of literary criticism', while others are more eclectic in their criteria for inclusion but include essays which adopt this socio-historical approach.³¹ One collection, edited by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner, describes the question of 'cultural contextualization' and 'reconstruction' as a key area of interest, which they suggest now 'dominates critical thinking in this field'.³² A number of the articles which have appeared in these collections and elsewhere take on the practical task of using these strategies for the interpretation of specific texts by eighteenth century women. The emphasis in all of these articles is on specificity, that which Todd calls for as an antidote to a previously naïve and generalising historicism.

My theoretical approach takes these developments in studies of late eighteenth century writers as its starting point and one of the primary agendas of my project is to situate Barbauld and Smith within the specific socio-historical context in which they wrote. This focus on their interaction with key discourses of the late eighteenth century will also inform my readings of their poetry. However, I am aware that as language, and in particular poetic language, is complex, there is a danger of reading the surface of the poems in a too literal and obvious way, a tendency which has sometimes been criticised in readings based on socio-historical contextualisation. In an essay entitled 'Questioning "The Romantic Ideology": Wordsworth', Susan Wolfson examines the New Historicist, Jerome McGann's reaction away from the close reading of the text advocated by Cleanth Brooks in his seminal critical work, *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947). Wolfson argues that in replacing this New Critical model with historicism, a method which 'insists on returning the study of literary texts to their historical contexts' and of 'restoring the framework New Criticism heuristically set aside', McGann and others tend to 'neglect textual nuance' and

'ambivalence of tone', and reject the positive aspect of New Critical work: the 'commitment to the complex ways in which literary language can signify'.³³ This notion of 'textual nuance' and 'ambivalence' needs to be re-inscribed into historicised readings of poetic language.

Other critics of the writing by women in the late eighteenth century have noted that as there was much which could not openly be said by women at that time, these writers 'created opportunities for self-expression through strategies of indirection, obliqueness, and doubling', which are the linguistic and 'imaginative counterparts of the paradoxical behavior they were encouraged to cultivate in everyday life' (Poovey, p. 42). In the poems on which this thesis focuses there are a number of political issues addressed, in particular the question of women's rights, which some women may have felt the need to contribute to and comment on in oblique and indirect ways, and a socio-historical contextualisation should function to make us more, not less sensitive, to such nuances. To return to the question of 'How Can We Read Women's Writing of the Romantic Period?', Armstrong suggests that a 'politics, an epistemology, an account of knowledge, and an understanding of language can be derived from women's questioning of a number of discourses - aesthetic and philosophical, socioeconomic, medical, and legal' (Armstrong, p. 16), but she also suggests, giving the example of the clash between Wollstonecraft, Barbauld and Burke's theories of the sublime and the beautiful, that the 'complex set of alignments within British radical and "feminist" thought suggests the necessity of reading at other than the level of content, of what a poem overtly says, if the subtle negotiations with male texts by women poets are to be followed' (Armstrong, p. 17). It is at this nexus of socio-historical contextualisation and an awareness of the complexities and layering of poetic language that this thesis situates itself theoretically. It seeks to focus 'both on what is stressed as intentional and what appears subliminal, discordant and unintentional' (Todd [1988] p. 86) in the poems, as a way of challenging the previously naïve assumptions of earlier socio-historical feminist approaches, without turning to the ahistoricism of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

My critical analysis of each poet is given in four chapters, three of which examine their poetry produced at specific historical moments and one preceding these which

offers a biographical overview of the poet's life and work. Presenting biographical details in relation to women's poetry can be dangerous and has led to accusations of simplistic autobiographical readings of that writing. The overemphasis of biography in some critical readings of poets like Sylvia Plath, leads Jan Montfiore to warn against any naïve feminist belief in the 'primacy of female experience in women's poems'.³⁴ This is particularly a danger with a poet like Charlotte Smith who seems deliberately to include autobiographical details in her prefaces, so that the poems can be read merely as narratives of her suffering. Although I offer biographical details of both poets, I do so in a way which precedes and informs my reading of the poems rather than merely directing that reading, and which contributes to an awareness of the network of socio-historical influences on individual women writers.

Indeed, in terms of a focus on the political, some degree of biographical detail is necessary since it serves as a further contextualising background to the poems. Mary Poovey defends the use of biography for this purpose in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*:

I examine the artistic career of each writer in the context of the biographical material that is available, for only by placing literary activity and style within the entire range of behaviour elicited by a cultural situation can we make sense of an author's personal position within an ideology. (Poovey, p. 46)

By far the most obvious reason for prefacing the readings of the poems with a chapter offering biographical detail of the poets' lives is the fact that these women writers are still relatively unknown. As I am not concerned with texts merely as texts, but as woman authored texts, it is important to establish a sense of authorial presence. Angela Leighton, in her anthology, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, is faced with a similar anxiety in her prefacing each reading with biographical material and offers a useful argument in its defence:

The problems of biography are especially acute for critics of women's writing. Since Wimsatt's formalist rejection of 'the intentional fallacy', the sentence of death on the author...has been widely and wittily pronounced. Yet feminist criticism, by its very nature, needs to ask 'Who is this author?' who, far from having to die, has not yet been brought to life in the reader's consciousness. For these critics, the

signature of the woman writer is not a dispensable addendum, because, as Nancy Miller points out, only those with a sense of the importance of their own signature 'can play with not having it'....Rosi Braidotti, similarly, challenges modern theory's failure to perceive that, in the case of women, 'one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted'....The problem of the author, of the 'signature', remains central to any feminist criticism, but especially to one concerned with unknown or unfamiliar writers.³⁵

My inclusion of biographical material is neither naïve nor uninformed about the deconstructionist claim of the death of the author, but like Leighton I would want to argue that it will be time enough to isolate these texts as texts, and not women authored poems, when we have examined them closely in relation to a specific historical moment and the lived experience of that moment, and established once more a sense of these authors in our literary consciousness.

A final take on my theoretical approach comes from the correlative channels of recent critical thinking emerging from academic discussions of newly discovered Victorian women poets. In the introduction to a collection of critical essays in this field, Tess Cosslett presents a summary of recent critical work. She describes recent development as marked by

its inclusiveness, and unwillingness to be pigeonholed as belonging to any one particular theoretical school, while using the resources of many. There is often a mixture of a prevailing feminism, a historical and biographical approach, linking the writer to social and political issues, and a clever post-structuralist reading of individual poems. The critic is claiming the importance of these writers in as many ways as possible, and filling in as many gaps in our knowledge as possible. There is a refreshing sense of enjoying and promoting these writers, rather than putting them through the theoretical mill.³⁶

Ultimately my aim in this thesis shares a similar focus and agenda, to find a positive and refreshing approach to the poetry of Anna Barbauld and Charlotte Smith which generates rather than shuts down meaning, which opens them up to wider critical discussion, and in doing so renders their poetry interesting and relevant once again.

'Unsex'd Females': The Reaction Against Political Women Writers

Making claims for the importance of newly discovered women writers will always beg the question from defenders of our current literary canons as to why their poetry was excluded in the first place. This is obviously a complex issue and several critics have already written usefully on the ideology at work in the male canon makers of the early twentieth century.³⁷ I myself point to some issues which are specific to Barbauld and Smith in the introductory chapters on these two women, which help us to theorise their subsequent absence from literary canons despite their contemporary popularity. I want here just to posit another important factor which affects not only Barbauld and Smith but several of the women writers of the period who write politically.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century an extreme reaction set in against the turbulent decades spanning from the 1770s to the 1790s, in terms of their radicalism, liberational fervour, and the gender politics which was always seen to underpin this. This kind of reactionism is in fact already apparent by the late 1790s and resonates through such texts as *The Pursuits of Literature* (1797) by T. J. Matthias, in which he exhibits his awareness of the crucial links between politics and literature, terming literature, 'THE GREAT ENGINE, *by which all civilized states must ultimately be supported or overthrown*'.³⁸ He goes on to note both the class and gender implications of changes in literary consumption and production during these turbulent decades:

Our peasantry now read the *Rights of Man* on mountains, and moors, and by the way side; and shepherds make the analogy between their occupation and that of their governors. Happy indeed had they been taught to make no other comparison. Our *unsexed* female writers now instruct, or confuse, us and themselves in the labyrinth of politics, or turn us wild with Gallic frenzy. (Matthias, p. 244)

Polwhele takes up this specific connection between women writing politics and the undermining of the status quo in his poem *The Unsex'd Females* (1798), which was written in reply to Matthias. Here Polwhele actually names names, offering a paranoid and vitriolic attack on particular women writers - including the 'veteran BARBAULD' (Polwhele, p. 15) and 'charming SMITH' who 'resign'd her power to please' (p. 17) - whom he figures as 'A female band' (p. 6) of Amazons responding

to the leadership of Wollstonecraft. Both Matthias and Polwhele direct their anger specifically towards women writers and it would seem significant that at this time the rise in the numbers of women publishing meant that for the first time in history women actually dominated the literary scene. At a time when civil and human rights were foregrounded in Britain because of the revolution taking place in France, women having a public voice through literature and using it politically, must have been all the more alarming to the male establishment, and it is this voice which Matthias, Polwhele and others attempt to silence.

There are overt connections made in Polwhele's poem between the turbulent sexual politics of these years and the influence of revolutionary France. He describes the taste for the revealing fashions worn by lady republicans in Paris:

With equal ease, in body or in mind,
To Gallic freaks or Gallic faith resign'd,
The crane-like neck, as Fashion bids, lay bare,
Or frizzle, bold in front, their borrow'd hair;
Scarce by a gossamery film caret,
Sport, in full view, the meretricious breast. (Polwhele, p. 7)

It was this kind of establishment fear at revolutionary ideas extending into the arena of sexual politics which engendered the subsequent ideological repressions of women writers and the parallel constriction of their bodies in whalebone stays during Victoria's reign.

Fuel was added to this move to suppress radical women writers by the publication of Godwin's *Memoir* in 1798, which revealed Wollstonecraft's affair with Gilbert Imlay as well as her attempted suicide after being abandoned by him. This publication dealt a major blow to the political radicalism and feminism which had been brewing in these decades, giving a weapon to those who stood in opposition to Wollstonecraft's particular blend of revolutionary politics and feminism, by providing a moral reason for condemning both the woman and that for which she stood. As Stuart Curran argues, the publication of Godwin's *Memoir* left Wollstonecraft 'an exemplary creature regularly held up for public reproof' (Curran [1993], p. 189). Many women writers of the period were allied with Wollstonecraft's

brand of revolutionary feminism by Polwhele because of their public demonstrations of intelligence and their involvement in politics. Such transgressions were figured by him as a perversion from 'NATURE'S law' (Polwhele, p. 6). The success of these strategies of public rebuke and personal attack can be viewed most clearly in the next generation of women writers, such as Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, who both cultivate a more acceptable image of the feminine poetess and who move their poetics away from the discourses of radicalism into the safer terrain of Victorian family values. The women writing politically in the turbulent final decades of the eighteenth century - when future British life and politics seemed uncertain, when women's fashions allowed new degrees of physical freedom and when women dominated the literary world - were all but absorbed into these later images of feminine poetesses and both their work, and their radicalism forgotten.

The Urgency of Re-Reading

There is a historical appositeness in studying the women writing at the end of the eighteenth century at this point in history, at the end of the twentieth. It may be that on turning back to this historical moment which now seems so detached and removed from ours in terms of ideology, politics, language, pre-occupations, and values, that we find we have more in common with that moment than we had thought. Most obviously we share with these writers a *fin-de-siècle* awareness, which whether or not we, or they, are overtly aware of, must nevertheless be a crucial factor in our perceptions of our place in history and the future. Malcolm Bradbury, summarising Frank Kermode's critical argument in *The Sense of an Ending* writes that:

the turning of a century has a strongly chiliastic effect; it helps distil men's millenarian disposition to think about crisis, to reflect on history as revolution or cycle, to consider, as so many *fin-de-siècle* and *aube-de-siècle* minds did consider, the question of endings and beginnings, the going and coming of the world.³⁹

Both Barbauld and Smith's later poetry is obsessed with apocalyptic visions and with history as a vast narrative in which their own moment is illuminated. We too, writing at the end of the twentieth century should be aware of our moment in history, how it relates to writers of the past, and our hopes for the future. In relation to these

poets, this for me takes the form of considering how in the next century they may be re-inscribed into literary history.

As Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner note, '[t]exts by women writers from the Romantic period are now making small inroads into the standard undergraduate Romanticism class, but the underrepresentation of women writers persists' (Wilson and Haefner, p. 6). This underrepresentation will only be challenged if women writers of this period are looked at closely, individually, and on their own terms. My thesis reflects the current move towards providing scholarly editions of these women poets who, until twenty years ago, were all long out of print. A part of my rationale behind choosing to work on the poetry of Anna Barbauld and Charlotte Smith is the publication of scholarly editions of their poems. Editions such as *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (1994) and *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (1993) are both crucial stages in the process of the recovery of these writers and their re-inclusion in the canon of English Literature; for the next stage, in-depth critical discussion is required.⁴⁰ Many more women poets of the late eighteenth century need to be re-printed and numerous full-length critical studies need to be produced, before these women will be written back into the position from which they originally wrote, the mainstream of literary culture. This project contributes to that movement.

Notes

¹ Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798).

² Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 6.

³ Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 6.

⁴ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

⁵ Elaine Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1985), pp. 125-143 (p. 131).

⁶ Harriet Kramer Linkin, 'Taking Stock of the British Romantics Marketplace: Teaching New Canons through New Editions', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 19:2 (1995), 111-123 (pp. 112-3).

⁷ Anthologies of women poets of the late eighteenth century in print are: *Women Romantic Poets 1785-1832: An Anthology*, ed. by Jennifer Breen (London: Everyman, 1994); *Romantic Women Poets 1770-1838: An Anthology*, ed. by Andrew Ashfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997); and *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997). To date the only anthology which does not identify the poets within this movement are *Eighteenth Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*, ed. by Roger Lonsdale (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁸ In a recent essay Greg Kucich has pointed to the current re-evaluations of the term Romanticism and recent suggestions of alternative terms by which we should refer to this period for the purposes of critical analysis, such as 'Long Romanticism' or 'The Age Formerly Known As Romanticism', which would allow for a more inclusive understanding of the literature written at this time. Kucich himself argues against the dismantling and 'unsettling' of 'Romanticism as a critical paradigm' within the contemporary academic climate, since to do so he suggests is 'also to put it at risk as an institutional category' (Greg Kucich, 'Romantic Studies: The State of the Art or Scholars in Search of a Period', *The Wordswoth Circle*, 28:2 [Spring 1997], 82-4 [p. 83]). These recent re-evaluations of Romanticism as a literary term and category should in the future allow for a much more diverse and complex inclusiveness, but at the present time the term 'Romanticism' still carries with it a great deal of problematic baggage for the study of women writers of the period, and

a sidelining of this category/term may therefore be helpful in the primary investigations of their work.

⁹ At Lancaster University the first term of the 'Romantic Poetry and Prose' course is nearly half given over to studying Wordsworth alone or alongside Coleridge, in the second terms the week on 'Women's Poetry' stands alongside 'Irony and Negative Capability: Keats', and 'P. B. Shelley: Love and the Sublime' (information taken from a second year course booklet, 1997/98).

¹⁰ Nancy Hartsock, 'Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 157-175 (p.160).

¹¹ Duncan Wu, 'Introduction', in *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. xxiv-xxviii (p. xxviii).

¹² Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *L'Écriture féminine*', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1985), pp. 361-77 (p. 371).

¹³ Shirley Ardener (ed), *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 11-12.

¹⁴ For an argument on the limitations of this binarism see Lawrence E. Klein, 'Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29:1 (1995), 97-109; Mitzi Myers, "A Peculiar Protection": Hannah More and the Cultural Politics of the Blagdon Controversy', in *History, Gender and Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. by Beth Fowkes Tobin (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. 227-257 (p. 231).

¹⁵ Joseph Addison in *The Spectator*, ed. by Gregory Smith, 4 vols (London: Dent, 1973), III, p. 70.

¹⁶ Cited in “A Woman Who Has Only Paradoxes to Offer”: Olympe de Gouges Claims Rights for Women’, by Joan Wallach Scott in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, ed. by Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 102-120 (p. 115).

¹⁷ Cited in *Women In Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents Translated with Notes and Commentary*, ed. by Darlene Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 219.

¹⁸ Hélène Cixous, ‘Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays’, in *The Newly Born Woman*, by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, trans. by Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), pp. 63-132 (pp. 66-7).

¹⁹ Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 603.

²⁰ Stuart Curran, ‘Women Readers, Women Writers’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 177-195 (p. 185).

²¹ Gary Kelly, Revolutionary and Romantic Feminism: Women, Writing, and Cultural Revolution’, in *Revolution and English Romanticism: Politics and Rhetoric*, ed. by Keith Hanley and Raman Selden (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, St. Martin’s Press, 1990), pp. 107-130 (p. 119).

²² See also by the same author: ‘Reform or Ruin: “A Revolution in Female Manners”’, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 11, (1982), 199-216 and ‘Hannah More’s Tracts for the Times: Social Fiction and Female Ideology’, in *Fetter’d or Free: British Women Novelists 1670-1815*, ed. by Mary Anne Schofield and Cecelia Macheski (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1986), pp. 264-284.

²³ Kathryn Sunderland, 'Hannah More's Counter-Revolutionary Feminism', in *Revolution in Writing: British Literary Responses to the French Revolution*, ed. by Kelvin Everest (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 27-63 (p. 27).

²⁴ Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction 1660-1800* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. 223.

²⁵ Greg Kucich, 'Gendering the Canons of Romanticism: Past and Present', *The Wordswoth Circle*, 27:2 (Spring 1996), 95-102 (p. 101).

²⁶ Cora Kaplan 'Language and Gender', in *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism*, by Cora Kaplan (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 69-93 (p. 69 and p. 70).

²⁷ Stuart Curran, 'Romantic Poetry: Why and Wherefore?', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 216-235 (p. 218).

²⁸ Isobel Armstrong, 'The Gush of the Feminine: How Can We Read Women's Poetry of the Romantic Period?', in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 13-32 (p. 15).

²⁹ Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History: A Defence* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988) and Marilyn L. Williamson, 'Toward a Feminist Literary History', *Signs*, 10 (1984), 136-147.

³⁰ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 1:4 (1976), 875-93 (p. 878).

³¹ Beth Fowkes Tobin, 'Introduction: Feminist Historical Criticism', in *History, Gender, and Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. by Beth Fowkes Tobin (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. 1-13 (p. 1).

³² Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner, 'Introduction', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 1-14 (p. 9).

³³ Susan J. Wolfson, 'Questioning "The Romantic Ideology": Wordsworth', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 3 (1990), 429-447 (pp. 430-2).

³⁴ Jan Montfiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 1994), p. 6.

³⁵ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 4.

³⁶ Tess Cosslett, 'Introduction', *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Tess Cosslett (London and New York: Longman, 1996), pp. 1-24 (pp. 2-3).

³⁷ See for example Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Anne K. Mellor neatly sums up the issues at stake in the canonisation of six male poets in the introduction to *Romanticism and Feminism*. She argues that:

The critical canonization of only six of the literally hundreds of male and female writers of the early nineteenth century reflects certain assumptions deeply embedded in our political culture. These six male poets have been heralded because they endorsed a concept of the self as a power that gains control over and gives significance to nature, a nature troped in writings as female. They thus legitimized the continued repression of women and at the same time gave credence to the historically emerging belief in the primacy of the individual over the group. (Anne K. Mellor, 'Introduction', in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. by Anne K. Mellor [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988], pp. 3-9 [p. 8])

³⁸ T. J. Matthias, *The Pursuits of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues*, 13th edn (London: Beckett, 1805), p. 244.

³⁹ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, (eds), *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 51.

⁴⁰ *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994) and *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

ANNA LÆTITIA BARBAULD

From Pleasure to Politics

Overview

If perceived in terms of the literary history which has been constructed through masculine tradition, the poetry of Anna Lætitia Barbauld marks the transition from neo-classicism, the dominant mode of writing in the early to mid eighteenth century, to Romanticism. This positioning of Barbauld, as straddling uncomfortably two major literary movements, is suggested by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft in their recent scholarly edition of Barbauld's poetry. They argue that 'Barbauld belongs almost equally to two generations' since her 'verse displays an eighteenth-century adherence to balance, common sense, and poetic diction and meter, but it also celebrates the individual, the passionate, and the fanciful in a clearly Romantic manner'.¹ What is perhaps more significant about Barbauld's poetry is precisely the way in which it exceeds the two literary categories by which we have come to conceptualise and define writing of the period. The fact that her poems do not fit neatly into either Augustan or Romantic poetics would suggest that these categories are inadequate for understanding and positioning her work, and this is largely because our perceptions of these discourses have been constructed without a sense of the poetry which Barbauld and her immediate female contemporaries wrote. I would dispute the implication of McCarthy and Kraft's analysis, that what makes this woman's poetry interesting is her intersection with these two discourses, and suggest that her significance lies rather in the fact that here, we have a major poet of the eighteenth century who cannot be placed without distortion, into either of the two literary categories by which we have come to define the writing of that period.

While Barbauld's poetry cannot be adequately encompassed by either Augustan or Romantic poetics, or indeed by a combination of the two, Barbauld herself would certainly have been aware of the poetics of neo-classicism, and traces of this are evident in her poetry, in the Latin epigraphs, the use of heroic couplet, and the

marked presence of capitalised abstractions and personifications in the poems. Barbauld's niece, Lucy Aikin acknowledges this influence in her 'Memoir', arguing that a 'warm attachment to the authors of what has been called the Augustan age of English literature, - on whom her own taste and style were formed, - was observable in the conversation of Mrs. Barbauld, and often in her writings'.² In relation to Romanticism, Barbauld actually distinguished herself from what she perceived as this new metaphysical poetics, in her continued commitment to politics even after the failure of the French Revolution.³ An alternative to this reading of Barbauld's poetry as a movement between Augustan and Romantic discourses is to perceive her work in terms of a tension between using a prestigious, well-established, authoritative poetics and the search for an original voice. In this latter quest Barbauld would inspire and impel aspects of the Romantic movement but persistently sets her own poetic agenda apart from that of the first generation Romantics.

There is an important movement in Barbauld's poetry between an emphasis on pleasure in the early poems and a focus on politics after 1790. Although even within the early poems there is an interaction with wider public discourses and ideas, it is in Barbauld's later poetry that politics become the dominant issue. If we were to accept McCarthy and Kraft's description of Barbauld's work as a development from Augustan poetics to those of Romanticism, it would be possible to see the move from pleasure to politics as evidence of this evolution, since Romantic poetry - contrary to Barbauld's assessment - is usually seen to have a radical political agenda, whereas Augustan writing, although satirical, tends to be viewed as more self-indulgent in outlook, less serious in its handling of social issues, and more playful in style. Barbauld's use of form however, does not correspond to this evolutionary trajectory. In her 1773 poetry collection in which pleasure is emphasised above politics, a number of poems experiment with blank verse, the form which is most closely associated with the Romantic poets writing at the end of the century, while in her later political poem, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, she significantly returns to the use of heroic couplets. What seems to be illustrated by this pattern is Barbauld's need to employ the authority of neo-classic poetic forms in her moments of most anxious and transgressive politicising.

A more accurate understanding of Barbauld's move from pleasure to politics in her poetry is derived from an awareness of the changes which took place in her own life and in the political climate in which she was writing. The three subsequent chapters which proffer readings of Barbauld's poetry are arranged historically, in a structure which allows for an awareness of the ways in which her poetics changes thematically with her social circumstances and with an increasingly politicised intellectual climate. Chapter Two focuses on her early poems which were composed in the relatively comfortable, progressive and promising years spent in Warrington, and which reflect the intellectual interests born there as well as the changes wrought on that area by the industrial revolution. Produced in this optimistic and liberal environment, the early poetry is dominated by the idea of pleasure as opposed to politics, although much of this is transgressive in its engagement with 'public' issues such as industrialisation and the developments in science associated with the Enlightenment. Chapter Three examines the poems written in the highly politicised and charged atmosphere of the revolutionary years of the 1790s, which explicitly reject pleasure and the private world as a subject for poetry and turn instead to address the most radical public issues of the day. Chapter Four looks at Barbauld's later poems, written during the Napoleonic wars, focusing in particular on *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, in which she adopts a more omniscient historical and prophetic political stance, as she scans a repressive, violent, consumerist Europe and reflects bitterly on the darker side of the European Enlightenment. In such a reading of Barbauld's poetry her immediate environment and ideological positioning in relation to changing political discourses is crucial, and requires some biographical detail. Furthermore, a stark change has occurred in Barbauld's literary fame since 1805, when Henry Crabb Robinson, noting in his diary that he had just formed an acquaintance with her, wrote that, 'Mrs. Barbauld is so well and advantageously known...that it is needless for me to attempt characterising her here'.⁴

Biography

Anna Barbauld was born Anna Lætitia Aikin on June 20 1743, the eldest child and only daughter of John Aikin D.D. and Jane Aikin née Jennings. The family settled in the then small and secluded village of Kibworth Harcourt, Leicestershire where John Aikin opened a school for boys. The upbringing of Anna and her younger

brother John, fell mainly to their mother; biographers note that Jane Aikin was a strict woman who, being afraid that 'living in a boys school might make her daughter rough and ill-mannered', made great 'efforts to bring up her up with the utmost decorum and propriety', and that consequently '[m]other and daughter were always uncongenial to one another'.⁵ Despite her strictness in parenting Jane Aikin nevertheless took pride in her daughter's obviously quick mind and rapid grasp of learning; in a letter written some years later she recalled her daughter as being 'eager to learn', and who, 'at two years old' could 'read sentences and little stories in her *wise book*, roundly, without spelling, and in half a year more could read as well as most women' (cited in Aikin, p. vi).

Barbauld's father and her maternal grandfather, the Reverend John Jennings, were both dissenting clergymen, and dissent was to play a key role in her life and politics. The term dissent came into use soon after the revolution of 1688 and by mid eighteenth century, non-conformist churches formed an significant alternative to religious establishment views. Dissenting churches refused to conform to the doctrines of the Church of England and as a result of this, their members were denied entry to English universities. Excluded from mainstream establishment teaching, dissenters had to set up their own academies, which were instituted primarily as seminaries for the training of non-conformist clergy, but would become breeding grounds for liberal intellectual thinking. The non-conformist sect with which Barbauld's family identified themselves was Unitarian, which was distinguished by a denial of the doctrine of trinity and a freedom from formal doctrine; it was also by far the most progressive of all dissenting groups - described by one commentator as constituting an 'intellectual elite amongst Nonconformity'.⁶

The most significant moment of Barbauld's young life, and one that would introduce her to wider society and previously unimagined fields of learning, was her father being appointed classical tutor at the newly established dissenting academy at Warrington in 1758, when she was fifteen. Since the Unitarian religion was open to the revelations of science and the laws of change and evolution, the academy drew to it some of the key Enlightenment scientists and thinkers. Those attracted to Warrington academy in these years included: Joseph Priestley, the chemist and

physicist who discovered oxygen; Malthus, the political economist; and at one point, Jean Paul Marat, who would later become a Republican leader in the French Revolution.⁷ The institution to which they were drawn constituted one of the most liberal and forward looking intellectual communities of the period. It was ahead of its time in granting subjects like science and mathematics an important place in the curriculum, as one biographer notes, '[s]ubjects were taught at the Academy which would be disclaimed by Oxford and Cambridge for another century' (Rodgers, p. 41). A circular issued on the 11 July 1754 states the aims of the academy as being to provide its pupils with

some Knowledge of the more useful Branches of literature; and to lead them to an early Acquaintance with, and just Concern for, the true Principles of Religion and Liberty: of which great Interests they must in future life be the Supporters. (cited in Rodgers, pp. 33-4)

The values put forward by this academy, in particular its 'Concern for' the 'Principles of....Liberty' were to remain lifelong concerns for Barbauld, forming the foundation of her political allegiances and appearing as recurring themes in her poetry.

The academy's situation at Warrington can itself have been no accident since as Rodgers notes, the town of Warrington had long been a stronghold of dissent, as indeed was the whole county of Lancashire' (p. 36). As well as having a significant dissenting presence, Lancashire's population was booming and the county was a melting pot of ideas and conflict. Lancashire was also undergoing rapid industrialisation and such developments as the building of the Bridgewater canal in 1761, as well as other important aspects of the Warrington environment, find their way into Barbauld's first collection of poetry, which she published with her brother's encouragement in 1773 as *Poems*. The building of the academy in Warrington meant more significant changes for the area in terms of cultural development; one historian argues that 'in the 1770s and 1780s' the 'success of the Unitarian academy at Warrington shifted the intellectual, if not the imaginative, centre of the kingdom from London to an area bounded by Manchester to the east and Liverpool to the west', and Warrington itself became known as 'the Athens of the North' (Rodgers, p. 38).⁸

Warrington academy and the social life which went with it profoundly influenced Barbauld's thinking and writing, both in her early poems and throughout her creative life. The eminent figures attracted there became part of Barbauld's immediate social group and with many she became lifelong friends. Aikin notes that 'Warrington academy included among its tutors names eminent in science and in literature: with several of these, and especially Dr. Priestley and Dr. Enfield and their families, she formed sincere and lasting friendships' (Aikin, pp. x-xi). Priestley appears in several of Barbauld's poems and her close proximity to such significant male Enlightenment figures, who shared the same progressive social, religious and political views as her own family, made the discourses of science and reason more available to her than to most women of the period. She refers to the social and intellectual environment of Warrington in her first known poem, 'On Mrs. P[riestley]'s Leaving Warrington', in which she describes her visits to the Priestleys' home: 'Oft have I there the social circle joined/Whose brightening influence raised my pensive mind' (41).⁹ That Barbauld spent her formative years in an environment which advocated intellectual liberal questioning at a time of quite radical transformations and debate in politics, religion, society, civil rights, science and philosophy, is crucial to understanding her politics and her poetry. To some extent her later adoption of a more public voice in her poetry and essays must be seen as firmly rooted in these formative influences, but the complex gender imagery found in the poems also points to her problematic positioning as a woman in relation to this intellectual questioning.

The ideals and progressive outlook of Warrington do beg the question of where women were to be positioned in relation to this agenda. While Barbauld had witnessed first hand the open questioning of established beliefs, the emergence of new and radical ways of understanding the world, and the expansion of human knowledge, she had viewed these developments from the margins, with all the frustrations this engendered. The greater degree of intellectual freedom which Barbauld experienced as a young girl in comparison to most women in the eighteenth century, seems to have made her all the more aware of the ways in which she was excluded from Enlightenment learning on gender grounds, and this comes

across in her views on education. Of all dissenting groups the Unitarians were by far the most liberal and progressive, and one historian of the period claims that the Unitarians were, at this time 'about the only religious body' to support and 'give education to women' (Prickett, p. 120). While the Academy itself never formally taught female students, Barbauld's own 'entirely domestic' (Aikin p. vi) education was significantly added to by her father teaching her Greek and Latin, a fact which Harriet Martineau would later refer to in her *Autobiography*, describing Barbauld as 'the best example we have of the benefits of a sound classical education to a woman'.¹⁰ Barbauld's education became something of a landmark in women's circles and was held up as enlightened and progressive. A contributor to the *Lady's Monthly Museum* in 1798 wrote that '[f]ew have more conspicuously displayed the fine effects of a liberal and correct education; enjoyed more fully, or more honourably exemplified, the blessing of virtuous and enlightened parentage, than Mrs. Barbauld'.¹¹ This classical education, which granted her access to the dominant mode of poetry writing at this time, along with other evidence in her poetry of a rudimentary knowledge of astronomy and current political affairs, would seem to confirm Prickett's view that, in a private context at least, Unitarianism fostered fairly liberal views towards the education of women.

Whether or not Barbauld took on board these liberal attitudes towards women's education however, is often seen as a matter of some doubt, and a letter written later in her life in response to Elizabeth Montagu's request for her assistance in establishing an academy for women is viewed as evidence of Barbauld's anti-feminist and anti-progressive stance on female education. In the letter she declines to assist with the project of teaching girls 'in a regular systematic manner', and her statement that she believes the project ill-calculated to produce 'good wives or agreeable companions', would appear to suggest that she wanted to deny women the liberal education she had herself received (cited in Aikin, p. xvii). However, what the letter in fact demonstrates is the extent to which Barbauld was aware of the limitations which would be placed on women's knowledge and of the fact that she was given an education because of her father's progressive outlook, and not as an inalienable right. She writes of her own education that her 'situation has been peculiar, and would be no rule for others' (p. xix), suggesting an awareness that, having been

surrounded by liberal and progressive thinkers from an early age, she had been permitted to display her intelligence to an extent denied most women of the period. She had nevertheless been made aware, even in this environment, of the limitations placed on her access to fields of knowledge, and writes that 'to have too great a fondness for books is little favourable to the happiness of a woman' (p. xix). The letter expresses a bitterness and a sense of futility in receiving or giving an education which could not be openly manifested: 'Young gentlemen, who are to display their knowledge to the world' should be taught openly at academies, but, as any knowledge in a woman will be 'carefully concealed' by those around her and 'if displayed, punished with disgrace', she should acquire learning 'in a more quiet and unobserved manner' (p. xviii). The same language was in fact used by Montagu herself on another occasion in a manner suggestive of the same contradiction; Mary Poovey notes that Montagu's comments that 'a woman should "conceal whatever Learning she attains" is sharply undercut by her mastery of Latin, German, Turkish, Spanish, and Greek, and by her own publications'.¹² Barbauld, like Montagu, is far from rejecting education for women, but she is pointing out that in the roles realistically open to a woman in the eighteenth century - wife and companion - intelligence and ill-disguised learning could function less as a path to freedom than as another area of repression.

After the publication of *Poems* in 1773 there is a long break before Barbauld published any other poetry apart from devotional hymns or collections for children, a hiatus which is acknowledged in Aikin's 'Memoir'. Aikin notes that, having 'thus laid the foundation of a lasting reputation in literature' the young poet

might have been expected to proceed with vigour in rearing the superstructure....[b]ut an event....was about to subject her to new influence, new duties, - to alter her station, her course of life, and to modify even the bent of her mind. (Aikin, p. xiv)

The 'event' which modified the 'bent of her mind' was her marriage in 1774 to the Reverend Rochemont Barbauld, a Presbyterian minister of French descent. For the next sixteen years Barbauld would publish few literary works and no poetry. The works she did produce seem to have been directly affected by aspects of her new life. In 1775, only a year after the marriage, she published *Devotional Pieces compiled*

from the Psalms and the Book of Job, which is viewed by her biographer Betsy Rodgers as evidence of her ‘mood of uncertainty and doubt’ in the early days of her married life (Rodgers, p. 64). This suggestion is supported by a letter which Barbauld wrote to her cousin Betsy Belsham just days before the wedding, describing her misgivings about the impending nuptials and hinting at her love for another man:

It was too late, as you say, or I believe I should have been in love with Mr Howard....next Thursday they say I am to be finally, irrevocably married. Pity me, dear Betsy; for on the day I fancy when you will read this letter, will the event take place which is to make so great an era in my life. I feel depressed, and my courage almost fails me. (cited in Rodgers, p. 63)

Almost immediately after their marriage the couple moved to Palgrave, Suffolk where together they ran a successful school for boys. Shortly after this removal Barbauld made a bizarre request to her brother to make herself and her husband a ‘gift’ of one of his children, and in 1777, after three years of childless marriage, they adopted Barbauld’s nephew, Charles Aikin.¹³ Influenced by her two new interests in life, Barbauld turned to writing educational literature for children, and published *Lessons for Children* in 1778 and *Hymns in Prose for Children* in 1781. Dr. Johnson criticised this redirection in Barbauld’s career as being a waste of her talents and early classical education, commenting acerbically in 1775 that

Miss [Aikin] was an instance of early cultivation, but in what did it terminate? In marrying a little Presbyterian parson, who now keeps an infant boarding school, so that all her employment now is, ‘To suckle fools, and chronicle small-beer.’ She tells the children, ‘This is a cat, and that is a dog, with four legs and a tail; see there!....’ If I had bestowed such an education on a daughter, and had discovered that she thought of marrying such a fellow, I would have sent her to *Congress*.¹⁴

Barbauld’s virtual literary silence during these years was also decried by her brother, John Aikin, who had encouraged her in the publication of *Poems*. He addressed a sonnet to his sister which similarly suggests that her talents were being wasted in the ‘new duties’ of marriage:

Did I, Lætitia, lend my choicest lays,

And crown thy youthful head with freshest bays,
That all the' expectance of thy full-grown year
Should lie inert and fruitless?....
Seize, seize the lyrel resume the lofty strain!
'Tis time, 'tis time! hark how the nations round
With jocund sounds of liberty resound, -
And thy own Corsica has burst her chain!
O let the song to Britain's shores rebound,
Where Freedom's once-loved voice is heard, alas! in vain.
(cited in Aikin, p. xxxv)

Aikin draws attention here to the aspect of Barbauld's early poetry which is in the main ignored by critics, but which would be most crucial to her later political writings and which is a key aspect of their shared dissenting ideology: the celebration of freedom. The emphasis on freedom in this context however, as a rallying cry to his sister to encourage her to begin writing poetry seriously again, may also have other implications, since John Aikin had elsewhere been extremely critical of Barbauld's choice of husband. The silence which these lines roused her from was notoriously marred by marital unhappiness. John Aikin attributed his sister's choice of a Frenchman with his 'crazy demonstrations of amorous rapture, set off with theatrical manners', to the influence of Rousseauistic sentimentality; as Lucy Aikin notes in a passage omitted from her 'Memoir' published in 1825, '[m]y father ascribed that ill-starred union in great part to the baleful influence of the "Nouvelle Héloïse"'.¹⁵ Rochemont Barbauld suffered from severe mental disturbances which worsened throughout his life and in 1785, despite its success, there was a sudden decision by the couple to give up the school at Palgrave. The abruptness of this decision hints at a sudden and severe attack of her husband's madness, and Rodgers comments in her discussion of the incident that 'there is no doubt that Mr Barbauld's mental state unfitted him any longer to carry the responsibility of keeping a school' (Rodgers, p. 92). The giving up of the school was followed immediately by a nine month tour of the continent, during which time they met relations of Rochemont Barbauld's in Geneva and made other acquaintances in France, forging links which would further influence Barbauld's subsequent support of the French Revolution.

That John Aikin not only recalled Barbauld to poetry because of a newly politicised climate but in order to ease her private suffering is suggested by an earlier sonnet

addressed to his sister, written in 1785. It is less insistent than the later poem, but is far more poignant:

Fair land! by nature decked and graced by art,
Alike to cheer the eye and glad the heart,
Pour thy soft influence through Lætitia's breast
And lull each swelling wave of care to rest;
Heal with sweet balm the wounds of pain and toil,
Bid anxious, busy years restore their spoil;
The spirit light, the vigorous soul infuse,
And to requite thy gifts, bring back the muse.¹⁶

The argument used by Aikin is significant. The muse of poetry is to 'lull' the 'swelling' waves of care and 'heal' 'wounds of pain' with a 'sweet balm', suggesting that Aikin recognised his sister's need to escape through her writing, a marriage which at times caused her not only mental but physical suffering. His description in the later sonnet of his sister's 'full-grown year' as 'inert and fruitless' seems to hint at the fact that the marriage was childless and that writing would function as a replacement child for Barbauld, along with his own son Charles. Elsewhere Barbauld herself suggests that she had taken on board this displacement of maternal instincts, referring to her writing as a 'child', towards which she felt 'all a parent's anxiety for its fate and establishment in the world' (cited in Ellis, p. 63).

John Aikin's lines read as a cry to break out of the inertia which the marriage represented and Barbauld did indeed begin writing poetry seriously again from 1790 onwards, after she and her husband had settled in Hampstead, a popular watering place which had attracted writers such as Richard Steele in the past and which would draw to it the likes of Keats, Shelley, and Leigh Hunt in the future. This return to poetics seems to have been partly a result of her brother's encouragement but also a response to the charged political climate of these years. As Rodgers notes, the 'domestic calm' of Barbauld and her family 'was disturbed by political events which their consciences would not let them ignore' (Rodgers, p. 105). When Barbauld begins writing again it is with a much more overtly politicised agenda and the freedom which she celebrated in her earlier poems is now grounded in appeals for political reforms of all kinds. Such a dramatic transformation should be viewed as a reaction to the changed political and social scene she found herself to be writing in;

these are the years of the French Revolution when political change appeared imminent, and freedom was no longer seen as an abstraction but as a meaningful political objective.

Barbauld's dissenting background would lead and influence her political agenda in these radical years. Her re-appearance in a major way on the literary scene in 1790 corresponds with and responds to the dissenters' third motion put to parliament for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts which effectively banned dissenters from public office.¹⁷ The third application made on March 2 1790 was the product of a three year campaign that argued for repeal on the grounds of human and civil rights, and which Albert Goodwin describes as the 'first reform issue to be vitally influenced by the outbreak and progress of the French revolution' (Goodwin, p. 81). The speech made to the House of Commons by Charles Fox in 1790 on behalf of the dissenters was answered by Edmund Burke in a damning address that emphasised the potentially revolutionary aspects of the dissenting case, and which openly allied dissenting politics with support of the revolution in France. It was at this moment and in this debate that Barbauld re-inserted herself into literary prominence, and in the most radical way, with a political pamphlet. She continued to speak out on radical and contentious political issues for the remainder of this decade, using her poetry as a forum for polemic, despite the increasing levels of censorship and repression in reaction to the threat of violent revolution. Her connections with radical politics came to a head in 1798 when Barbauld was described as 'the most conspicuous figure in the groupe' of Polwhele's *Unsex'd Females*, in his paranoid and vitriolic attack on political women writers whom he perceived to be following the lead of the arch-feminist, Wollstonecraft.¹⁸

Barbauld's position in relation to Wollstonecraftian feminism is in fact ambiguous as my reading of her apparently anti-feminist poem, 'The Rights of Woman', in Chapter Three will show. Dissent is one of the few obvious links between the two women since, as Janet Todd notes, Mary Wollstonecraft was also 'nurtured in Dissenting circles', and this is significant since by the 1790s 'Dissent especially allowed a political voice to women'.¹⁹ Wollstonecraft and Barbauld in fact shared a number of political agendas, including the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts

and the abolition of slavery. It may be that this dissenting link also offers us a clue to a shared agenda of feminism. Being placed in a dissenting position may well have made both women more aware of the gender inequality inherent in most aspects of eighteenth century society; as Marlon Ross points out, a woman dissenter occupied a position of 'double dissent - as a political female and as a female within a non-conforming community deprived of civil liberties'.²⁰ Given Barbauld's intellectually progressive background it is difficult to believe that she was not influenced by an awareness of gender inequality and this thesis endeavours to explore this awareness as a crucial aspect of her political outlook.

Along with Barbauld's rejection of Montagu's suggestion of establishing an academy for girls, also frequently cited as evidence of Barbauld's anti-feminist stance is her refusal to contribute to the literary lady's magazine which Maria Edgeworth proposed in 1804. Again however, this rejection should not be taken out of context, but be seen in terms of Barbauld's own explanation. She infamously stated in her letter of reply to Edgeworth that '[t]here is no bond of union among literary women' since 'different sentiments and different connections separate them much more than the joint interest of their sex would unite them' (cited in Le Breton, pp. 86-7). These lines have been taken as evidence of anti-female solidarity but they could equally be read as a proto-twentieth century feminist awareness of differences between women, which renders the notion of a shared agenda on the grounds of biological sex problematic. Barbauld goes on to argue, quite perceptively, that '[m]any would sneer at the title' of 'The Lady's Paper', and would 'pretend to expect, however unreasonably, frivolity or romance' (p. 87). Barbauld wants to write political poetry at this time and not be confined to the subject matter which women were supposed to write; she describes the enterprise as 'a female junto', or secret group, which would entail writing 'in trammels' (*ibid.*). Barbauld's argument against Edgeworth's suggestion is that were she to write for the magazine she would be restricted to writing in what were acceptably 'feminine' genres, especially romance, an area which she had always avoided in her poetry and which one early reviewer noted was significantly absent in her first collection of poems.²¹ The separatism of eighteenth century ideology encapsulated in the rhetoric of the separate spheres is challenged by Barbauld in her poetry which repeatedly transgresses into the public

sphere. She rejects the enterprise of the women's magazine precisely because it confirms that separatism.

In 1802 Barbauld and her husband moved again, this time to Stoke Newington, in order to be near to Barbauld's ailing brother, and it was here that she would remain for the rest of her life. During the time she spent in Stoke Newington Barbauld founded a book society and befriended members of the ostracised Jewish community. She remained busy, editing and writing introductory essays to a selection from the *Spectator*, *Tatler*, *Guardian* and *Freeholder* as well as a six volume edition of Richardson's letters. While Barbauld's literary reputation flourished however, her private life became progressively more troubled. In these later years Rochemont Barbauld's illness grew increasingly malevolent and one biographer suggests that Barbauld's diverse literary enterprises at this time, were 'engaged in as a solace under domestic anxiety which had become more and more depressing' (Murch, p. 82). Rochemont Barbauld's illness took on the form of a 'violent antipathy to his wife' (Rodgers, p. 136), leading to his threatening to kill her on several occasions and on one pursuing her around their dining-room with a knife. The suffering which Barbauld incurred in her marital relationship was widely known; Lucy Aikin records that in these years Rochemont Barbauld was 'liable to fits of insane fury' and that as long as her aunt 'persisted in occupying the same house with the lunatic', family and friends were on the constant lookout, since her 'life was in perpetual danger' (cited in Le Breton, p. 43 and p. 44). Years later, Harriet Martineau would recall in her *Autobiography* being moved by 'anecdotes' of Barbauld's 'heroism when in personal danger from her husband's hallucinations' (Martineau, p. 302). Finally, and against her wishes, Barbauld had to agree to a separation from her husband, during which, in November 1808, he escaped the man-servant hired to look after him and drowned himself.

Now a widow, Barbauld turned once again to her literary career with two impressive projects. In 1810 she edited a fifty volume collection of British novelists, prefaced with an essay on novel writing and with biographical sketches of each novelist. She returned to poetry after another long silence and in 1812 wrote her magnificent poem, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, in which she predicts the fall of the British

Empire. Interestingly, both the poem and the longer *British Novelists* project promulgate new canons which read male and female writers together, and which continue to challenge the separatist ideology of the age. Following a scathing and violently abusive review of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, Barbauld published little else in her lifetime although she continued to discuss in letters to friends the possibility of putting together another poetry collection, or more likely, a complete works.²² She persisted however, in backing unpopular political causes in her private life until her death; Henry Crabb Robinson, who befriended her in these later years, notes in his diary that in 1814 when Helen Maria Williams became subject to 'defamatory reports' because of her letters written from France, 'altogether in favour of the French cause', Barbauld told him that she would fly in the face of public opinion 'if Miss Williams came to England' and 'should invite her to stay in her house' (*On Books*, p. 148). Barbauld remained a slightly eccentric, but generally respected figure until the end of her life, continuing to wear her hair unfashionably grey and remaining true to the now seriously unpopular dissenting cause. Her final years seem to have been troubled only by a mild asthmatic complaint and she died in 1825, a grand matriarch of literature, at the age of eighty-two.

Contemporary Literary Status

The extraordinary range and significance of Barbauld's career was hinted at as early as 1825, when Lucy Aikin wrote her 'Memoir' giving an overview of her aunt's work. Aikin suggests that 'when the productions of a writer extend over so long a period as nearly sixty years, they become in some measure the record of an age, - a document for the historian of literature and opinions' (Aikin, p. lxii). The absence of Barbauld from our understanding of the literature of this period is a loss which it is difficult to measure and harder yet to explain. Since her reputation has been so obscured and forgotten it is important to re-establish a sense of how she was perceived by her contemporaries. In the poet Anna Barbauld we are not talking about a little-known and obscure writer, but a woman whose work was extremely popular, widely read, and favourably reviewed. A writer whose poetry was to influence the Romantic movement as we have now come to conceptualise it and who was admired by fellow writers such as Hannah More, Mary Robinson and Maria Edgeworth, as well as those who have come to outstrip her in fame: Wordsworth

and Coleridge. Wordsworth was reputed to have said, on hearing the last stanza of Barbauld's poem 'Life', 'I am not in the habit of grudging people their good things, but I wish I had written those lines' (cited in *On Books*, p. 8). Wordsworth and Coleridge in fact seemed to have considered Barbauld something of a poetic mentor in their youth; Coleridge walked forty miles, from Stowey to Bristol, to meet her and referred to her as 'the great and excellent woman Mrs Barbauld', and as Duncan Wu notes, Wordsworth 'ordered his publisher to send her a complimentary copy of the new two-volume *Lyrical Ballads*'.²³

Despite her transgressions into the sphere of politics and attacks by conservative writers like Polwhele, the name and popularity of Barbauld reached its zenith in the seventeen-nineties, when her return to the literary scene fixed her as one of England's most eminent poets. Reviews like that in the *Lady's Monthly Museum* praised Barbauld's continuing popularity and literary excellence, claiming that Barbauld's *Poems*

are now in the possession of every person who has any pretensions to taste, and every library in the kingdom; and public suffrage has amply ratified their claim to distinction....little or nothing, in the same species, has ever appeared in our language, to which her poems ought to give place. ('O.', p. 173)

In her female readers Barbauld inspired something more than straightforward literary appreciation; Mary Scott, in her poem arguing for women's greater intellectual involvement, 'The Female Advocate', describes her response to Barbauld's 'intellectual paintings' (*Romantic Women Poets*, 426) in the following terms: 'We feel thy feelings, glow with all thy fires,/Adopt thy thoughts, and pant with thy desires' (*ibid.*, 427), suggesting that in some female circles at least, Barbauld was considered to be a liberating voice, advocating political and intellectual freedom, and even perhaps viewed as a spokesperson for women's political and social desires. Well into the nineteenth century Barbauld retained tremendous popularity, particularly in literary circles; in 1855 Harriet Martineau was to refer to her as 'still....one of the finest writers in our language' (Martineau, p. 302), and Walter Savage Landor is reputed to have demanded of her poem 'A Summer Evening's

Meditation', '[c]an you show me anything finer in the English Language?' (cited in Murch, p. 94).

It may then be seen as something of a literary enigma that a poet whose very first poetical volume was greeted with almost universal acclaim, or with 'unmixed applause' as Lucy Aikin puts it (Aikin, p. xiii), and whose work continued to inspire such impressive admiration, should have been so completely forgotten by subsequent literary history. The general introduction to this thesis has pointed to some of the complex cultural and political changes which led ultimately to the exclusion of women writers of this period from our canons. In the case of Barbauld her political and in particular her dissenting stance was an important factor in her changing popularity. Four years before her death Henry Crabb Robinson noted in his diary that 'she has not gone with the age in matters of taste and poetry, and has gone too exclusively with a sect in religion and morals' (*On Books*, p. 260), and this is echoed by Wordsworth in a letter of 1830 in which he observes that, Barbauld was 'spoiled as a Poetess by being a Dissenter, and concerned with a dissenting Academy'.²⁴ As Jerom Murch notes in his 1877 biography of Barbauld, a date by which her work had largely been forgotten, 'party feeling....interfered seriously with literary justice; some of the leaders of public opinion obviously allowed their political antipathies to bias their judgement' (Murch, p. 93). As well as these more overtly political motives for exclusion there were also those who took a dislike to Barbauld for more personal reasons and who later acquired a powerful and influential cultural voice. Coleridge, despite his earlier enthusiasm for Barbauld, later developed a violent antipathy towards her - probably based on her criticism of his 'metaphysical' poetics - and even before her death he was ridiculing her poetry in his lectures.²⁵ Charles Lamb also made no bones about his dislike for Barbauld, writing to the receptive eye of Coleridge in 1802 that her children's books were 'nonsense', conveying 'Knowledge insignificant and vapid'.²⁶ As I will show in Chapter Four, John Wilson Croker adopted this same technique of ridiculing her talents in his damning review of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, and it is perhaps this ridicule from such influential corners which proved most damaging to Barbauld's literary fame.

Recent Critical Reassessment

There is at the present time, as a product of the revisioning of Romanticism, something of a tentative reassessment of women poets writing in the same period, including Barbauld. As I have suggested, these stirrings of revision are partly hampered by examining Barbauld directly in relation to Romanticism. Nevertheless, at a time when previously forgotten writers are being re-examined, and formerly fixed literary canons being questioned, it is crucial to re-establish Barbauld's literary status and significance for future literary studies. In a number of recent anthologies of women Romantic poets Barbauld has been described in favourable terms; Roger Lonsdale terms her 'the most versatile of women poets of the period' and Andrew Ashfield echoes this when he describes 'the range of her activities' as 'unparalleled by other women poets'.²⁷ Despite these assessments, which hint at the tremendous significance of Barbauld as a poet, few critical works have been produced on this writer and even fewer which challenge the marginalising depiction of her as a poet of the domestic and the sentimental. One of the few essays to offer a clever and interesting reading of her poetry is 'The Gush of the Feminine: How Can We Read Women's Poetry of the Romantic Period' by Isobel Armstrong, which was discussed in the introductory chapter. Armstrong uses Barbauld's poem 'Inscription for an Ice-House' as the central test case for her strategy of reading women poets of the late eighteenth century and offers a sophisticated reading of that poem, showing it to be in negotiation with a number of contemporary discourses - philosophical, aesthetic and scientific. The essay, although focusing on only one text by Barbauld, is important in that it demonstrates the complexity of a poem which is often dismissed merely in terms of being a celebration of the quotidian.

It is only really in the United States that Barbauld is receiving critical attention as a significant individual literary figure. The gradual recognition of her literary importance has led to an excellent scholarly edition of her poetry being published in the States in 1994, edited by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft. It is the first edition of her poems to be published since 1884 and brings together for the first time all known poems written by Barbauld, 171 in total; it is offered, so the introduction tells us, 'in partial compensation for too many years of neglect'.²⁸ This edition, while expensive, is extremely comprehensive, with highly researched and

detailed notes on every poem. McCarthy, who is the current critical expert in the States on this much undervalued poet, is presently working on a biography of Barbauld. He has also published an essay entitled “We Hoped the *Woman* Was Going to Appear”: Repression, Desire, and Gender in Anna Letitia Barbauld’s Early Poems’ which, by examining the ‘codes’ in which gender politics were ‘encrypted in her time’, argues that Barbauld’s early poetry displays a feminist awareness.²⁹ The essay is a useful starting point for a re-assessment of Barbauld’s poetry but it only begins to challenge some of the preconceptions about her poetry which have led to years of critical neglect.

Both a scholarly edition of Barbauld’s poems and a new biography are extremely valuable if this poet is to be taught in any mainstream sense, but there still remains a dearth of any in-depth critical studies of her poetry, and none which focus on the political aspects of her work which she herself emphasised. In the next three chapters I begin to redress this balance and examine those very aspects of her poetry which are most transgressive and which led to her being feared by her male contemporaries, aspects which are now subsumed under the image of Barbauld as a ‘sentimental poetess’, as Marlon Ross somewhat imperceptively terms her.³⁰ My reading of Barbauld’s poetry will locate her work very firmly in the turbulent and potentially revolutionary years of the late eighteenth century, in the political climate which produced Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and at a moment when the issue of sexual politics became a key issue in a literary scene dominated by women writers. It will focus on the ways in which Barbauld addresses key political issues of the period through her poetry, including the industrial revolution, the invasion of Corsica by the French, the French Revolution, slavery, the rights of women, the Napoleonic wars and colonialism. These readings seek to demonstrate just how unusual and significant a poet Barbauld is in the range and confidence of her poetry, and in the way in which her work repeatedly challenges constructions of late eighteenth century women poets as writers of merely sentimental or domestic verse.

Notes

¹ *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), flyleaf.

² Lucy Aikin, 'Memoir', in *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld with a Memoir by Lucy Aikin*, 2 vols (London: Longman and others, 1825), I, pp. v-lxxii (p. xxxix).

³ For Barbauld's criticisms of the first generation Romantic poetics see my reading of her poem 'To Mr [S. T.] C[oleridge]' in Chapter Three.

⁴ *Henry Crabb Robinson: On Books and Their Writers*, ed. By Edith J. Morley, 3 vols (London: Dent, 1938), p. 8.

⁵ Betsy Rodgers, *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs Barbauld and her Family* (London: Methuen, 1958), p. 30.

⁶ Stephen Prickett, 'The Religious Context', in *The Romantics*, ed. By Stephen Prickett (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 115-163 (p. 119).

⁷ Marat was a tutor at the academy in 1772 and is said to have considered proposing marriage to the young Anna Aikin. See P. O'Brien, *Warrington Academy 1757-86: Its Predecessors and Successors* (Wigan, Lancashire: Owl Books, 1989), p. 94.

⁸ Donald Davie, *A Gathered Church: The Literature of the English Dissenting Interest, 1700-1930* (London and Henly: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 123.

⁹ Quotation taken from *Poems*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft. All subsequent quotations from Barbauld's poetry are taken from this edition and first line numbers only given in parenthesis in the text.

¹⁰ Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography with Memorials*, ed. by Maria Weston Chapman, 3 vols (London: Smith and others, 1877), I, p. 302.

¹¹ 'O.', 'Mrs Anna Lætitia Barbauld', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, 1 (September 1798), 169-179 (pp. 170-1).

¹² Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 40.

¹³ Cited in Grace A. Ellis, *A Memoir of Mrs. Anna Lætitia Barbauld, with Many of her Letters* (Boston: Osgood, 1874), p. 83.

¹⁴ *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. by R. W. Chapman, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 662.

¹⁵ Cited in *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld Including Letters and Notices of her Family and Friends*, by Anna Letitia Le Breton (London: Bell, 1874), p. 42: p.43.

¹⁶ John Aikin cited in Jerom Murch, *Mrs. Barbauld and her Contemporaries: Sketches of Some Eminent Literary and Scientific Englishwomen* (London: Longmans and others, 1870), p. 79.

¹⁷ Under the Corporation Act of 1661, 'no one could enter upon a civic or municipal office unless he had taken the sacrament of the Lord's Supper according to the rites of the Church of England within a year previous to his election' and under the Test Act of 1673 'all who held offices or places of trust under the Crown, whether civil or military, were required to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy, to sign a declaration repudiating the doctrine of transubstantiation, and to receive the sacrament according to the Church of England' (Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of Revolution* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979], p. 77). Although both Acts were designed to exclude Catholics from public office they effectively denied dissenters access to those posts as well.

¹⁸ Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798), p. 16.

¹⁹ Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction 1660-1800* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 197.

²⁰ Marlon B. Ross, 'Configurations of Feminine Reform: The Woman Writer and the Tradition of Dissent', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 91-110 (p. 93).

²¹ William Woodfall in a review of *Poems* writes that 'We hoped the *Woman* was going to appear; & that while we admired the genius & learning of her graver compositions, we should be affected by the sensibility & passion of the softer pieces. Miss Aikin....has, in some measure, disappointed us on the subject of Love' ([William Woodfall], 'Poems. By Miss Aikin', *Monthly Review*, 48:2 [1773], 133-7 [p. 133]).

²² See for example Barbauld's letters to Joanna Baillie dated February 2 1822 and March 20 1822, reprinted in Rodgers, pp. 241-2.

²³ *Collected Letters of Samuel Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), I, p. 341 and p. 393; Duncan Wu, in *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 7.

²⁴ William Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), I, p. 479.

²⁵ Henry Crabb Robinson notes in his diary that he attended a lecture given by Coleridge on January 27 1812 and writes that 'There were some excrescences in the lecture, and he offended me by an unhandsome and unmanly attack upon Mrs. Barbauld. He ridiculed some expressions in her *Ode to Content*, "The hamlets brown,

primrose and violet," etc. - "criticisms," he added, "which Wordsworth made to me at Charles Lamb's two years ago" (*The Diary of Henry Crabb Robinson: An Abridgement*, ed. by Derek Hudson [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967], p. 14).

²⁶ *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. by E. V. Lucas, 3 vols (London: Dent and Methuen, 1935), p. 326.

²⁷ Roger Lonsdale, in *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, ed. by Roger Lonsdale (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. xxxiii; Andrew Ashfield, in *Romantic Women Poets 1770-1838: An Anthology*, ed. by Andrew Ashfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 10.

²⁸ William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft, 'Introduction', in *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), pp. xxi-xlii (p. xxviii).

²⁹ William McCarthy, "We Hoped the *Woman* Was Going to Appear": Repression, Desire, and Gender in Anna Letitia Barbauld's Early Poems', in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 113-137 (p. 114).

³⁰ Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 13.

Early Poems: Shifting Intellectual and Political Horizons

Warrington: 'A Brightening Influence'

I begin my discussion of the political aspects of Barbauld's poetry somewhat paradoxically with 'Verses Written in an Alcove', a poem that explicitly rejects the social or public realm and which imagines instead a fantastic, asocial world of the imaginary. The reasons for this choice are twofold. Firstly, as one of Barbauld's earliest known poems - written probably in the early 1760s - 'Verses' serves to render more overt the shift from an emphasis on pleasure to politics in Barbauld's poetics. Secondly, and more importantly, my reading of this poem will demonstrate the extent to which even Barbauld's least apparently public poetry can be read in terms of a political agenda by an analysis of its subtle involvement with contemporary social and cultural discourses, in particular those associated with the Enlightenment. This poem is a useful starting point since it also sets up the complex issue of eighteenth century women's relationship to the Enlightenment, a theme which dominates much of Barbauld's early poetry and which underpins the darker political vision of her later works.

'Verses' is particularly relevant to an analysis of Barbauld's political poetry since it establishes the issue of politics and poetics very clearly, and on this occasion Barbauld turns away from the poetry of politics in favour of the pastoral and fanciful. Political subject matter which she would later refuse to turn her back on, such as war and empire is here rejected; hers is

Not the Muse who wreath'd with laurel,
Solemn stalks with tragic gait,
And in clear and lofty vision
Sees the future births of fate;

Not the maid who crown'd with cypress
Sweeps along in scepter'd pall,

And in sad and solemn accents
Mourns the crested heroë's fall[.] (37)¹

Along with political subject matter Barbauld's female muse also rejects the high status of poet-prophets and is 'All unknown to fame and glory' (49). While drawing on the popular Augustan concept of druids as poets, with her description of the 'rustic temple' (55) in which these poetic 'note[s]' (35) are 'Tune[d]' (36), Barbauld alters certain key characteristics of this pagan poetics and rejects others. Male Augustan poets such as William Collins in his 'Ode to Liberty' (1746), use druid temples as a symbol of British freedom; Barbauld's temple does function as a site of freedom, but that freedom is feminine not national. Moreover, Barbauld rejects the exalted construction of the druids as both bards and priests put forward by poets like Collins, who depicts the druid-poets singing the 'Triumphs' (112) of 'The Chiefs who fill our *Albion's* Story,/In warlike weeds, retir'd in Glory' (109).² Barbauld is appropriating key symbolism from Augustan poetics here but her use of this imagery functions to undermine its conventional meaning, suggesting that even in these early poems she is actively seeking to construct an original poetics which would reflect her own interests.

The rejection of the political in 'Verses', both overtly and through the poem's imagery, could be seen as an attempt to figure a feminine poetics, and indeed the poetry which the chosen muse inspires is feminised by being figured in terms of Burke's gendered category, the beautiful.³ Burke links 'sweet' and 'beautiful sounds' and the music which is produced in Barbauld's 'temple' is described as 'Sweeter, sweeter than the murmur/Of the distant water fall' (23), 'Sweeter than the breath of love' (32).⁴ Burke goes on to suggest that

the beautiful in music will not bear that loudness and strength of sounds, which may be used to raise other passions; nor notes which are shrill, or harsh or deep; it agrees best with such as are clear, even, smooth, and weak. (Burke, p. 112)

This description is echoed by the poetics which Barbauld advocates in the poem, and in her female temple, 'Every ruder gust of passion/Lull'd with music dies away' (25). In her allegiance to these gendered categories of private and beautiful for her

construction of a feminised poetics in the poem, Barbauld would seem to be placing this in opposition to a masculine poetics of the public and sublime. Moreover, Barbauld's poem is set at night, and in several early poems she uses the conventional gendering of the sun as masculine and the moon as feminine, to appropriate night for women, as a space which functions outside the rules of day and patriarchy. Barbauld describes the poetics imagined in this nocturnal feminised space through the concept of pleasure which is set in opposition to 'Care', a term that is used to represent the seriousness associated with patriarchal strictures, since 'Care was only made for day' (12).

William McCarthy, in his semi-biographical reading of Barbauld's early poetry, suggests that the construction of pleasure in these early poems is set against and in reaction to, the 'self-denial, rationalism, and emotional low temperature' of dissent.⁵ However, while Barbauld does reject care and seriousness in these early poems, she does not reject the rationality and intellect associated with the dissenting project in Warrington. The community of women figured in the poem, made up of the narrator, the female muse and 'Lissy', are not merely wasting their hours away, but are writing poetry; they are in fact a female literary community. The poetry produced by these women is described as 'Easy, blith and debonair' (50), which echoes Milton's description of the allegorised figure of Mirth in 'L'Allegro' and suggests the pleasure that their literary enterprise engenders.⁶ The same language is also used in a letter written by Barbauld to her cousin Elizabeth Belsham, describing the social group in Warrington and persuading Elizabeth to join them; she writes '[w]e have a knot of lassies just after your own heart, - as merry, blithe, and gay as you could wish them, and very smart and clever; two of them are the Misses Rigby'.⁷ One of the sisters in this actual female circle is Elizabeth Rigby, who features in the poem's imaginary group as 'Lissy'. The emphasis in the description of this female group in the letter as in the poem, is on carefree joyousness, however, there is a significant addition to the description in the letter, since these women are 'very smart and clever' as well. This statement would suggest that Barbauld does not seek to place pleasure in opposition to rationality, but rather that her concept of pleasure combines both gaiety and intellect.

'Verses', like the other poems of this period, in fact presents us with extremely subversive images of women, in which they are repeatedly connected to pleasure, intellect, laughter and liberty. In both this poem and 'The Invitation', female communities are established in which the rules and power relations of the social world do not apply. In this sense these communities operate in a manner similar to the carnivals depicted by Bakhtin, which are 'organized on the basis of laughter' and in which the people enter a 'utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance'.⁸ The female communities which Barbauld imagines function in precisely such a way for these women. The temporal and spatial zones in which her female figures meet - night and hidden natural enclosures - operate as does carnival time, in that they provide 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order' through a 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin, p. 10). In these spaces the oppositions of the social world, in which women are unequal to men and are excluded from Enlightenment learning, do not apply and the women are free to think.

There is still a tendency to construct eighteenth century women poets in opposition to the spheres of rationality and intellect, but Barbauld consistently refuses to maintain this opposition and she destabilises it here and elsewhere in her poetry. In another early poem, 'The Mouse's Petition', on which Marlon Ross has written usefully of Barbauld's appropriation of the political form of the petition, Barbauld presents Joseph Priestley with a humorous plea for Liberty on behalf of a mouse.⁹ The poem is read by Stuart Curran as 'a direct assertion of the claims of sensibility against male rationality' and a similarly conventional reading is put forward by one of the earliest reviewers of *Poems*, the *Critical Review* depicts the poem as a plea of a 'lady's humanity' and 'sensibility' against the 'cruelty practised by experimental philosophers'.¹⁰ Barbauld responded to this interpretation of the poem by adding a footnote in later editions of the collection in which she writes that, '[t]he Author is concerned to find, that what was intended as the petition of mercy against justice, has been construed as the plea of humanity against cruelty', and she argues that 'the poor animal would have suffered more as the victim of domestic economy, than of philosophical curiosity' (cited in *Poems*, p. 245). Barbauld's correction unsettles the complacent alignment of women with domestic affections and sensibility both then

and now. Her argument makes clear that she viewed scientific experiments on animals not as cruel but as necessary and reasonable, a claim which effectively positions her on the side of rationality and science.

In 'Verses' Barbauld's desire to place her female group and pleasure not in opposition to the Enlightenment but within its project, is also suggested by the title, in which she informs us that the poem is written in an 'Alcove', a spatial location which appears again in the body of the poem and appears to be where the female figures meet. This alcove has a specific geographical significance since it is identified by Betsy Rodgers and McCarthy and Kraft as a summerhouse in the garden of Warrington academy, and as such is a suggestive location for her female literary group to gather, since it positions them not outside but within the perimeters of this space of Enlightenment learning.¹¹ Placed in the garden they are both inside the academy's boundaries and yet outside its official centre, on the margins, and so the alcove becomes a fitting emblem of women's position in relation to the Enlightenment project. There are problems in the realisation of this spatial location however, for while the title announces that these are 'Verses Written in an Alcove', the poem goes on to establish 'Here' as a space 'between the opening branches' (5) and the alcove as elsewhere, since we are told that the fairies 'play' in '*yon* cool Alcove' (10, [my emphasis]). It becomes difficult to fix the actual space from which the poet writes and where the female figures meet, hinting not only at some authorial anxiety about the ideological space from which the woman poet enters the literary scene, but also at the tensions inherent in Barbauld's positioning in relation to the Warrington Enlightenment.

Gendering the Enlightenment

Along with allusive references to the Enlightenment in Barbauld's early poetry there are also moments in which she explores key developments in the progress associated with that movement in a more overt way, through images of science, technology and canal building. Although I have argued that Barbauld wanted to associate herself with the intellectual changes she perceived to be taking place in Warrington, as a woman she is problematically positioned in relation to the Enlightenment and this emerges as a tension in her poetry. In a recent work on the European

Enlightenment, Dorinda Outram suggests that '[c]olonialism, the exotic, and the exploitation of nature were inextricably linked in the eighteenth century, and provide verification of the contention that Enlightenment and the control of nature were parts of the same project'.¹² While overtly seeking to validate the Enlightenment project, a number of Barbauld's poems make the connection Outram identifies - between progress and the exploitation or control of nature - through the use of increasingly riven or contradictory imagery. A clue to the significance of this complex representation of progress is in the gendering of these tropes, in which an Enlightenment which allows access to women and which suggests freedom is gendered feminine, while a darker oppressive version which excludes women is gendered masculine. This subtle gendering, achieved through a clever, and often unconventional, use of abstractions and personifications, may point to an awareness that women were themselves victims of the darker, exploitative agenda within the European Enlightenment. Through an analysis of two key poems, 'A Summer Evening's Meditation' and 'The Invitation', I want to point to a movement in Barbauld's poetry from a figuring of the Enlightenment as an emblem of freedom to a representation in which the imagery symbolising that project is riven with contradictory meaning.

'A Summer Evening's Meditation' is in execution the most accomplished and sophisticated poem of this early collection. It is also the most transgressive and exhilarating of the poems, imagining as it does a flight into the 'trackless deeps of space' (82). Here Barbauld figures a positive representation of scientific enquiry which is used to develop a greater understanding of the natural world and implicitly to engender radical social change. The fashion for using contemporary scientific developments - such as more readily available telescopes and knowledge about new planets - in poetry, was fairly common in the eighteenth century and probably the earliest predecessor for the poem was Anne Finch's 'A Nocturnal Reverie' (1713). Barbauld's poem bears a much closer resemblance however, to James Thomson's *Summer* (1727) from *The Seasons*, but in crucial ways Barbauld rewrites the power structures of the spatial territories which Thomson imagines. Before exploring the changes which Barbauld makes to Thomson's vision of the planetary system, it is

worth exploring the metaphorical and practical significance of astronomical study for women at this time.

Although the discourses of science and technology in the late eighteenth century were dominated by men, the developments in science which had taken place throughout the century and earlier, did filter down to middle and upper class women. Discussions of astronomy appeared in *The Spectator* and other journals perused by the leisured classes, and numerous science books appeared explaining the rudiments of astronomy, several of which were intended for a female audience. With Warrington academy's emphasis on the sciences in teaching, the library would have owned several scientific textbooks, and from the structure of the poem it seems likely that Barbauld had read one of the English translations of Bernard le Bovier, Sieur de Fontanelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des Mondes* (1686), of which four versions appeared in Britain, the latest being by Aphra Behn in 1715 and published as *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*. Fontanelle's work takes the form of a conversation between a Marquise and a scientist, and according to Patricia Phillips is significant in that it promotes the idea that women were 'particularly receptive to an understanding of the newest scientific theories', as well as presenting 'an important image of a lively female intellect grappling with scientific problems'.¹³

Fontanelle's text book bears a close relation to the structure of Barbauld's poem, and although his discourse on the planetary systems takes place over five moonlit summer nights rather than one, he covers the same trajectory of exploring and describing the planets, as well as discussing the possibility of man's travel into space. Phillips notes that Fontanelle 'sought to convey a sense of a vastly expanding universe of knowledge whose foothills only had yet been explored' and 'at the same time he made it plain that women, too, could join in this new and exciting investigation' (Phillips, p. 88). Fontanelle's work, with its emphasis on women's involvement in astronomy and his seductive descriptions of flights both imaginative and physical into outer space may well have provided the theoretical model for Barbauld's own meditative journey. In 1773, the year that Barbauld's poem was first published, an important and in many ways similar interest in women and astronomy was also exhibited by Hester Mulso Chapone in her *Letters on the Improvement of the*

Mind. Chapone, whom Barbauld later met and became friends with, had elsewhere argued against the subjection of daughters to fathers, claiming that ‘women, as rational and accountable beings, are free agents as well as men’.¹⁴ Her later exhortation to women to look to the skies with a ‘philosophic eye’ in order to ‘enlarge your mind’ reminds us that the subtext to this use of science is broadly speaking feminist, in that it seeks to extend women’s educational horizons.¹⁵ Chapone writes that it is ‘impossible to describe the sensations I felt from the glorious, boundless prospect of infinite beneficence bursting at once upon my imagination’ (Chapone [1808], p. 100), an experience which corresponds quite closely with that which Barbauld attempts to describe in the poem. For both women the contemplation of space offers them an emblem of freedom at its most exhilarating, which is both desocialised and at the same time firmly rooted in Enlightenment notions of progress, and the real social change this promised.

Barbauld’s deployment of astronomy in the poem reflects then the interests nurtured at Warrington Academy and hints at the tantalising possibilities raised for women by Enlightenment learning. Once again it is night which heralds the scene of female intellectual activity; during the day ‘Contemplation’, which is gendered feminine, is only to be found in:

....sunless haunts,
the cool damp grotto, or the lonely depth
Of unpierc’d woods. (18)

A similar description appears in Thomson’s *Summer* in which ‘the midnight depth/Of yonder grove’ (516) is described as the ‘haunt’ of ‘meditation’ (522).¹⁶ On this occasion however Thomson does not personify meditation and the dark woodland space is depicted as significant in terms of male literary tradition; it is here that ‘ancient bards’ (Thomson, 523) ‘Conversed with angels, and immortal forms’ (*ibid.*, 525). In contrast we find that in Barbauld’s poem the hidden enclosures within the natural world seem to be subtly claimed for women, in a way that echoes ‘Verses Written in an Alcove’. The repetition of this idea in Barbauld’s poems would seem to hint that such spaces are being appropriated for women to think, since as an asocial space the natural world is also outside the social rules in which

women are ideologically supposed only to feel. The thoughts which women have in these enclosures are potentially subversive since they are 'unripen'd by the sun' (22), a phrase which takes on particular significance in a poem in which the sun is figured as an emblem of male power.

Night is characteristically similar to enclosed spaces in that it hides and conceals and it is also, as I have suggested in relation to 'Verses', a carnivalesque time when the social repressions of the day do not function and women find freedom. Like the enclosed natural spaces, night is a realm in which women can think; she tells us that 'This dead of midnight' is 'the noon of thought' (51) when 'wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars' (52). In the poem Barbauld is granted further freedoms by the developments associated with the Enlightenment. Her female astronomer looks outwards into space with a telescope and her 'eye/Restless and dazzled' (28) wanders 'unconfin'd' (29). Technological advancement and new scientific theories bring here not only enhanced awareness but also imaginative freedom. While the eighteenth century woman's body remains constrained by eighteenth century mores, her mind is able to expand with an exhilarating sense of movement. In his essay on Barbauld's early poetry, William McCarthy comments that the freedom hinted at in this poem functions on only an imaginary level and that '[w]hat in life she is denied or discouraged from doing Barbauld asserts in imagination' (McCarthy, p. 130). I would suggest however that while this poem does describe an imaginary flight and function on an imaginary level, the freedom envisaged is grounded in real possibility. The flight into space is a symbolic one which stands for an actual, intellectual flight, since Barbauld is permitted to use the tools and discourses of astronomy and function at some level within the Enlightenment project.¹⁷

That Barbauld may have believed such intellectual and scientific advancements would lead to social and political change in favour of women, is hinted at in the power struggles depicted in the poem which rewrite the hierarchies Thomson describes. In Thomson's *Summer*, which takes place throughout a whole summer day and not just at night, the power of the masculinised sun is emphasised. It is described as the 'Soul of surrounding worlds' (Thomson, 95) by whose 'strong, attractive force..../Thy system rolls entire' (Thomson, 97). In Barbauld's poem we

only come in at the moment when the sun, figured as the ‘sultry tyrant of the south’ (1), has his power diminished and with the intervention of a female astronomer the galaxy transforms itself from a patriarchal regime ruled by the sun, into a matriarchy dominated by female planets and the moon, who ‘seems to push/Her brother down the sky’ (9).

That Barbauld was seeking to depict a distinctly feminined outer space and that her use of gendered abstractions in the poem is not merely conventional, is suggested by the confusion over her gendering of Saturn in lines 79-81. In the originally published version of the poem Saturn was gendered feminine by Barbauld and depicted as an ‘exiled queen’.¹⁸ This unconventional feminising of the planet was pounced on by William Woodfall in his otherwise complimentary review of the collection. He writes that ‘[t]here is, in this poem, a slight mark of seeming inattention, where the ingenious Writer speaks of Saturn in the feminine’ and thus commits an ‘offence against ancient mythology’.¹⁹ The language of this criticism suggests that the change was perceived as significant, as a sin or crime against classical, that is masculine, tradition. Following this comment Barbauld rewrote the lines, masculinising Saturn and this gendering remained in all subsequent editions. The feminising of Saturn may well have been a mistake on Barbauld’s part, but it would seem significant that in ancient mythology one of Saturn’s main attributes was that he ‘symbolized freedom’.²⁰ According to Bakhtin, the characteristics of the carnivalesque, in which the conventional rules of society were turned upside down, and which Barbauld comes close to describing in ‘Verses’, were ‘most clearly expressed in Roman Saturnalias’ (Bakhtin, p. 8). Moreover, there are subtle changes made to the depiction of the planet when Barbauld regenders Saturn masculine. She alters the phrase ‘In gloomy grandeur’ (*Romantic Women Poets*, 81) to ‘in gloomy pomp’, which hints at a more showy display of power, and omits the word ‘majestic’ (*ibid.*, 81) from the description of the planet’s regal enthronement. In the original version, it is from this queenly planet and her ‘weeping handmaids’ that Barbauld’s female astronomer launches ‘Fearless’ (*ibid.*, 82) into the ‘trackless deeps of space’ (*ibid.*, 83), suggesting that she intended to convey some sense of comfort and security in the power of the feminised planetary system for the female astronomer.

In Thomson's *Summer*, Saturn is conventionally masculinised and the planetary system he depicts includes only Venus as a feminised planet. Consequently, after the setting of the sun, there is no apparent shift into the feminised spatial territory that we find in Barbauld's poem. In an essay entitled 'The Politics of Fancy in the Age of Sensibility', Julie Ellison discusses the cosmic 'vistas' described in 'A Summer Evening's Meditation' in terms of 'Europe's geopolitical prospects' arguing that there is a 'clear correlation between cosmic place and power relations'.²¹ Although Ellison does point to the power dynamics at work in the poem, she obviously relies on the later versions of the text since she suggests that in Barbauld's tour of the system 'she passes one patriarchal form after another, from "solitary Mars" to Jupiter and finally "cheerless Saturn"' (Ellison, p. 234). This reading of the power relations belies Barbauld's emphasis on the female planets and attributes a gendering to Mars and Jupiter which Barbauld leaves open. In the context of Barbauld's original gendering of Saturn female and the emphasis on feminised planets taking over from the 'tyrant' sun, I would argue that the poem comes closer to a fantasy of female power, which occurs after the female astronomer dives into the galaxy. The act of flying up into the realms of space engenders a vision of a time and place outside patriarchal society, which moves from a matriarchy to a moment which appears almost pre-oedipal in its distance from male law:

....solitudes of vast unpeopled space,
The deserts of creation, wide and wild;
Where embryo systems and unkindled suns
Sleep in the womb of chaos. (94)

This involvement on the part of a woman in astronomy not only repudiates male control and hierarchies but also ushers in a system that is feminised and seems to predate male power.

Although Barbauld's flight into space has strong echoes of Fontanelle's discussion of space travel as a physical possibility, one crucial aspect of their visions is different since Fontanelle is 'silenc[t] on the religious implications of science' (Phillips, p. 88). As a Unitarian, Barbauld is concerned with the use of scientific exploration as further evidence of God and indeed she uses astronomy for this purpose elsewhere in her writings. In an essay entitled 'Thoughts on the Devotional Taste, and on

Sects and Establishments' she argues that astronomy is superior to philosophy as a means of enlarging 'our conceptions of the deity' since while philosophy 'raises him too high for our imaginations to take hold of', astronomy is able to offer some sense of infinity, and thus mediates the experience of the sublime:

When....we rise yet higher, and turn our eyes to that magnificent profusion of suns and systems which astronomy pours upon the mind - when....we trace the footsteps of creative energy through regions of unmeasured space, and still find new wonders disclosed and pressing upon the view, - we grow giddy with the prospect; the mind is astonished, confounded at its own insignificance.²²

These lines echo Burke's description of the sublime effect of contemplating God; he writes that '[w]hilst we contemplate so vast an object of almighty power....invested on every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him' (Burke, p. 63). Barbauld both in the essay and poem, re-writes this image of male power and strength by moving towards an image of God which is subtly feminised and whose sublime effects are deflated. In her essay she suggests that we 'require some common nature' with God 'on which to build our intercourse' (*Works*, p. 238), and in the poem, after the apparently sublime flight into the 'dread confines of eternal night' (93) and 'solitudes of vast unpeopled space' (94), she attains a vision of God which is not sublime but feminised and personal, a God that 'hast a gentler voice,/That whispers comfort to the swelling heart' (109). G. J. Barker-Benfield argues that Barbauld's depiction of God belongs within a tradition of women writers of sensibility at this time, in which the deity becomes an extension of the man of feeling. Barker-Benfield suggests that in place of the 'remote disinterested God of Newtonian philosophers' Barbauld presents a contemporary vision of God 'personifying the traits women wished to see in reformed men'.²³ In such a revision, some of the power of the patriarchal omniscient God is handed over to women, who control the moral climate of sensibility.

The final lines of 'A Summer Evening's Meditation' describing the visionary's unconvincing return to earth 'Abash'd' (111) are often read as reductive, but they retain the affirmative tone of the poem and hint at a future moment when freedom

is no longer merely imagined but fully realised, when ‘these splendours bursting on my sight/Shall stand unveil’d’ (120). Although this vision is couched in permitted religious terms, in the context of the poem her vision of a ‘world unknown’ (122) which she has glimpsed in her imaginative flight, is less a Christian heaven than a matriarchal power system with a feminised Godhead. In a reading of the poem as a discussion of women’s involvement in the Enlightenment however, there is something problematic in the description of the female astronomer’s return to earth, which should remind us of the limitations imposed on Barbauld’s flights of intellect by her gender. She writes that

....now my soul unus’d to stretch her powers
In flight so daring, drops her weary wing,
And seeks again the known accustom’d spot. (112)

Although permitted to dabble in astronomy Barbauld is nevertheless denied access to the serious scientific, medical and philosophical discourses of the Enlightenment and this generates a tension in many of her poems. These lines function to remind us that for a woman in the eighteenth century such flights of the intellect are indeed ‘daring’ and that when they are over she must return to the ‘known accustom’d spot’ of the private, domestic sphere.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, while Unitarian dissent fostered fairly liberal views on women’s education, women were never formally taught at Warrington academy and although Barbauld’s own domestic schooling was significantly added to by her father teaching her Greek and Latin, after the onset of puberty, Barbauld’s education veered sharply away from that of her brother. In a poem written to him while he was absent studying medicine at Manchester, entitled ‘To Dr. Aikin on his Complaining that she neglected him, October 20th 1768’, Barbauld is reminded of their shared childhood education in Kibworth, when ‘like two scions on one stem we grew,/ And....from the same lips one precept drew’ (27). She tries to suppress her ‘angry thoughts’ and ‘envy’ (35) at the later division of their education along gender lines:

Our path divides - to thee fair fate assign’d
The nobler labours of a manly mind:

While mine, more humble works, and lower cares,
Less shining toils, and meaner praises shares.
Yet sure in different moulds they were not cast
Nor stampt with separate sentiments and taste.
But hush my heart! nor strive to soar too high,
Nor for the tree of knowledge vainly sigh;
Check the fond love of science and of fame,
A bright, but ah! a too devouring flame. (50)

Barbauld critiques the eighteenth century notion that biological differences between the sexes fitted men and women for divergent educations and separate spheres. Her observation that she and her brother were not cast in 'different moulds' carries with it the implication that her relegation to the 'bounded sphere' (60) of domesticity is an unfair cultural placing based on her gender. The bitterness Barbauld feels about her exclusion as a woman from fields of learning emerges again in another early poem, 'The Invitation' in which she describes the opportunities laid at the feet of the male students of the academy:

How rich a field is to your hopes display'd!
Knowledge to you unlocks the classic page;
And virtue blossoms for a better age.
Oh golden days! oh bright unvalued hours!
What bliss (did ye but know that bliss) were yours?
What richest stores your glowing bosoms fraught,
Perception quick, and luxury of thought[.] (112)

The language Barbauld uses here: her description of the hours as 'unvalued', thought as a 'luxury' and the 'bliss' of education, all remind the reader of the value of that from which she is excluded and which the male students unquestioningly accept as their birthright. This poem also points to the first hint of a contradiction within the Enlightenment, suggesting a possible link between women's exclusion from learning and a darker, exploitative agenda within that project.

'The Invitation', although sharing many themes with 'Verses Written in an Alcove' such as the celebration of female friendships and the depiction of natural enclosures as a space for women to meet, moves beyond the immediacy of female pleasures and freedom, outwards from the enclosures and hidden spaces of the natural world, in order to comment on wider social issues, in particular the progress associated with

the industrial revolution and the Enlightenment. Before I explore these representations of progress however, I want to focus on the significance of some of the other gendered imagery in the poem. The poem enacts a struggle for freedom which is again closely related to the notion of pleasure and which is insistently gendered female. As in 'Verses' this pleasure is located outside the social world; Barbauld calls upon her cousin Elizabeth Belsham to leave the town with its 'mimic grandeur', 'illusive light' (10) and 'sickly joys' (12), and join her in the 'grateful shade of spreading trees' (17), where they may share the 'pure pleasures' which 'rural scenes inspire' (16). Barbauld is clearly drawing here on the eighteenth century opposition between the concept of a corrupt town and a pure country, but this takes on a gendered significance in the context of her insistent placing of female communities in natural, asocial spaces.²⁴

In the first section of the poem the metaphor of flying is introduced which ties in with the bird imagery used to represent science later in the poem. Barbauld wishes that 'peace eternal' may 'spread her downy wings' (6) over her friend's life and that 'Wing'd by new joys may each white minute fly' (3). She also bids Elizabeth to 'fly' from the 'busy cities' (15) where 'wreaths of curling smoke involve the sky' (16) to the natural world where she may 'drink the spirit of the mountain breeze' (18). The image of flying is crucially one of freedom and escape. In terms of Barbauld's contemporary moment, flights of the imagination and imaginary flying are often the only metaphorical strategies in which intellectual and social freedoms for women can be envisaged. 'Pleasure' is also feminised in the poem, allegorised as a 'smiling goddess' (33) and more significantly as a 'bird of passage' (21), which connects the figure to the feminised freedom. Winter in the poem is figured as patriarchal in his opposition to this Pleasure and in his attempts to repress and control freedom. A binarism is established in the poem between winter's rigidity and coldness and a feminised freedom of movement associated with Pleasure's 'airy form' (35). Women are thus linked to the idea of freedom through the use of gendered abstractions and other imagery, in a way which goes beyond the conventional gendering of Liberty female and which suggests movement and change. Barbauld's use of these tropes seems to indicate that she wants to locate women on the side of progress and in

particular on the side of a rational dissenting project of reform and change, with its openness to revelations of science.

In such a reading the notion of social reform also has a sexual subtext since Spring, allegorised as 'FLORA's breath', functions by some 'transforming power' (43) to change the phallic 'icicle into a flower' (44), thus engendering a metamorphosis from this symbol of male power and repression into an emblem of feminised regeneration and growth. Flora's 'transforming' breath in fact allows a movement through the various stages of female sexuality: once the phallic power of winter's ice has been melted, it is replaced first by a snowdrop, virginal and pre-pubescent, which is still scentless and its 'veins' 'icy' (46); after the snowdrop comes the 'dusky' violet (47); and finally the poem celebrates a mature female sexuality, as 'FLORA cries exulting, see my Rose!' (50). The analogy which Barbauld draws between women and flowers here functions much more subversively than the correlation made in another poem, 'To A Lady With Some Painted Flowers'. This was the poem which drew such scathing criticism from Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft quotes Barbauld's poem and calls her description of women and flowers as 'Emblems of Innocence and beauty' an 'ignoble comparison'.²⁵ In 'The Invitation' Barbauld uses flowers much less conventionally, as emblems of female sexuality in all its spectrum and not just as innocent purity, which as Wollstonecraft argues 'has ever been the language of men' (Wollstonecraft, p. 144). The way in which Barbauld utilises the imagery of flowers for her own ends in this poem, to represent a movement away from the stereotypes demanded of women by patriarchy into a sexuality denied then in its discourses, would suggest an awareness on her part of the significance of this imagery and positions her in much closer proximity to Wollstonecraft's own agenda.

Despite the positive connections made in the poem between women and freedom of movement, these images do not relate specifically to the intellectual and social changes taking place at this time. When we turn to the two key sets of images in the poem which represent the actual progress associated with the Enlightenment: science and canal building, we find that Barbauld's representation of these tropes is problematic and riven with contradictory meaning. The description of the building

of the Duke of Bridgewater's canal from Worsley to Manchester is a complex metaphor for the progress associated with the industrial changes taking place during the Enlightenment, and exhibits Barbauld's desire to engage with the urban industrialising forces changing Britain's landscape at this time. This sixty-seven kilometre long canal symbolically marked the beginning of the canal era in Britain and by providing cheap transportation of coal, was to significantly enhance the speed and progress of the industrial revolution. As such the canal is a potent image of the changes associated with the Enlightenment and this is suggested by the fluidity and freedom of the canal's movement:

'Cross the lone waste the silver urn they pour,
And clear the barren heath or sullen moor:
The traveller with pleasing wonder sees
The white sail gleaming thro' the dusky trees;
And views the alter'd landscape with surprise,
....
Now meeting streams in artful mazes glide,
While each unmingled pours a separate tide;
Now through the hidden veins of earth they flow,
And visit sulphurous mines and caves below;
The ductile streams obey the guiding hand,
And social plenty circles round the land. (65; 73)

Barbauld appears to represent this aspect of eighteenth century industrial development in straightforwardly progressive terms, viewing the changes as a means of bringing greater economic prosperity to Britain. However, there is also in Barbauld's description a hint of what Dorinda Outram perceives to be the other side of the Enlightenment project, the controlling of nature, which is disclosed by a conflicting set of images. Alongside the positive description of the canal moving and flowing freely, there is a hint of force and of a violation of nature in its construction. The labouring-classes who dig the canals, the 'sons of toil' (59), 'Scoop the hard bosom of the solid rock' (60) and burrow through the 'stiff opposing clay' (61). Nature is not figured as assisting but resisting the transformation and a tension is suggested within the description between 'ductile streams' (77) flowing freely and an 'unwilling flood' (63) which must be 'Compel[led]..../Through the brown horrors of the aged wood' (63).

Through this double-sided imagery Barbauld presents us with a divided image of Enlightenment progress. While the project in its ideal manifestation seems to offer social improvement and freedom, it is put into practice in a way that leads to exploitation and control. These two sides of the picture appear to be gendered respectively feminine and masculine through the second configuration of the Enlightenment project in the poem. Images of science also stand both for freedom and for a more troublesome inclination to control nature, and what distinguishes the two versions of science presented is specifically their very different approaches towards the natural world. The first version of science we encounter is Science the abstraction which is unconventionally gendered female, unconventionally because - as Ludmilla Jordanova points out in her work on the gendering of scientific discourse in the eighteenth century - science was usually figured as male, but also because the feminised abstraction is depicted as 'the bird of Jove' (102), an eagle.²⁶ This image of a feminised science taking the form of an eagle connects the figure and what it represents to the bird imagery found earlier in the poem and to freedom. This is suggested by the emphasis on the eagle's capacity for flight. In the description of this figure her 'strong pinions' (100) are foregrounded, especially as these are 'Crush'd' (100) by 'bigot rage' (99), which is figured phallically as a serpent and functions as did winter, to bind and restrain the feminised flight. Despite this restraint, it is the feminised Science's capacity for intellectual flight which is emphasised, in lines which recall the female astronomer's intellectual flight in 'A Summer Evening's Meditation'; the muse predicts that Science 'On sounding pinions yet aloft shall soar,/ And thro' the azure deep untravel'd paths explore' (107). This feminised version of science signifies intellectual freedom and is clearly valorised in the poem since it is described as 'heav'n born' (98) and as symbolising 'ardent progress' (101). What is most significant about this version of science however, is that it does not control or manipulate nature. Instead Nature, also feminised, actually connives with Science, sharing her secrets, as she 'opens all her secret springs' (97).

Later in the poem another, more problematic version of science appears, with a very different agenda towards nature and which in this respect is set in contrast to the earlier version. The later representation of science utilises the discourse and

methodology of eighteenth century scientific journals. As such, it is represented not as an abstraction, but by the scientists themselves who 'creep along the shelly shore' (155) with far more insidious intent, and since Nature does not open up to them, sharing her secrets, these are prised out of her. The scientists

Unfold the silky texture of a flower;
With sharpen'd eyes inspect an hornet's sting,

....

Some trace with curious search the hidden cause
Of nature's changes and her various laws;
Untwist her beauteous web, disrobe her charms,
And hunt her to her elemental forms. (156; 159)

This representation of science, although not explicitly gendered, would appear to be implicitly so, since it is set in contrast to the earlier feminised version and the mode of intrusive enquiry - the actions of disrobing, hunting and inspecting - would seem to hint at a masculine agenda. Jordanova observes that, 'Science and medicine as activities were associated with sexual metaphors which were clearly expressed in designating nature as a woman to be unveiled, unclothed and penetrated by masculine science' (Jordanova [1980] p. 45), and she points to numerous instances of this metaphor in eighteenth century scientific journals. The imagery of the poem suggests that in what is represented as the masculine version of science, that which excludes women, progress and the control of nature are closely entwined. Aligned with the natural world, women also become the focus of the scientist's attempts to penetrate and control, and indeed much eighteenth century scientific enquiry worked against women, attempting to prove them incapable of rational thought.²⁷

While Barbauld seeks to validate progress and science and thus locate herself on the side of a rational Enlightenment, the way in which this project translated itself in practice was through an act of exclusion towards women. Barbauld thus occupies a split position in relation to this project and her response to this is to imagine two oppositional versions of science, one which grants access to women and which therefore suggests freedom and movement, and another which not only excludes women, but which is used to control them and validate their domestic private role. It is this latter version, representing the darker side of the Enlightenment project, which Barbauld later comes to associate with the political crisis in Europe in her epic

Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, but which also appears as a subtext to her poems representing the exploitation of natural resources and other peoples, such as 'Epistle to William Wilberforce' and her earliest political poem, 'Corsica'.

The European Scene: 'This Late Sickly Age'

The final poem to be discussed in this chapter, 'Corsica', warrants some in-depth attention since it is the most overtly political of the poems written at this period. Here Barbauld crosses over fully from the realm of personal or meditative poetry to public polemic, an act of transgression which she would repeat many times in her literary career. Barbauld uses her role as poet to address one of the most heatedly debated issues in British parliament and press in the months between December 1768 and May 1769: the efforts of the island of Corsica - under the leadership of General Pasquale Paoli - to win independence from the Italian state of Genoa, the subsequent defeat of Corsica and its colonisation by the French. In the imagery of this poem, as in Barbauld's later political works, it is possible to perceive a subtle connection being made between the darker, exploitative side of the Enlightenment project and contemporary European politics. The plight of Corsica was brought to public attention with the publication of James Boswell's *An Account of Corsica, the Journal of a Tour to that Island, and Memoirs of Pascal Paoli* in 1768, a copy of which was ordered by Warrington library on February 4 that year and was no doubt seen by Barbauld, since she writes in the poem of 'generous BOSWEL' (19) and his campaign.²⁸ Attempts by British Liberals to force parliamentary aid for Corsica proved ineffective and the island became for many a potent symbol of the struggle for freedom; as McCarthy and Kraft note, the cause 'took its place in antigovernment ideology as one more example of failure by the duke of Grafton's administration to respect the principles of liberty that Britain was supposed, in Whig tradition, to champion' (*Poems*, p. 232).

Barbauld responds to the political ferment over this international incident and adds her voice to the liberal cause. The fact that this matter had already gained much popular support and lobbying in the British press, made it relatively safe ground for Barbauld's first foray into the political affairs of government. Her poem succeeded in embodying public sentiment in a way which drew the praise of male readers

concerned with the cause. In June 1769, just four weeks after the final eighteen lines mourning the defeat of the island had been penned, Joseph Priestley wrote to Barbauld describing the response of a Mr. Turner of Wakefield to her poem and making Turner's request that a copy of the poem be sent to James Boswell and published for the benefit of the Corsicans. Mr. Turner evidently saw the fact that the poem was written by a woman as being likely to engender popular support:

He is confident that it cannot fail greatly to promote their interest now that a subscription is open for them, by raising a generous ardor in the cause of liberty, and admiration of their glorious struggles in its defence. Its being written by a *lady*, he thinks, will be a circumstance very much in their favour, and that of the poem. (cited in Le Breton, p. 35)

These lines are intriguing in that they suggest that women's involvement in politics on this occasion is not only permitted but beneficial to the cause championed. The emphasis on the significance of the poem having been 'written by a *lady*' perhaps suggests that in humanitarian issues woman's voice as a moral agent is useful. Priestley also notes in his letter however, that Mr. Turner says he reads Barbauld's poems 'not with admiration but astonishment' (p. 34), a response which seems reminiscent of Dr. Johnson's infamous analogy of a woman's preaching to 'a dog's walking on his hinder legs': that in both cases '[i]t is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all'.²⁹ Turner like Johnson is impressed not so much by the skill of the poem, which is nevertheless very significant, but by the novelty of a political poem written by a woman. This letter also serves to remind us that in the eighteenth century, a woman entering the public political sphere is transgressing into a realm appropriated by men and this cannot fail to bring the full focus of the male gaze, with the possibility of censorious consequences, upon herself.

In its discourse on Liberty, 'Corsica' can be situated in the context of Augustan constructions of this concept. Since the revolution of 1688 when Britain had established the principles of democratic government, Liberty had been figured by the country's poets and writers as a peculiarly British possession. Augustan poets following Locke's political philosophy depicted freedom as a basic human expectation from government and yet repeatedly characterised Liberty as almost uniquely British.³⁰ Pope refers to 'Fair Liberty, Britannia's goddess' (Pope, 91) in

Windsor Forest and Collins in his 'Ode to Liberty' hails Liberty as that 'Nymph, ador'd by *Britain*'.³¹ The most lasting and memorable of these Augustan expressions of an illusory and specifically national figuring of freedom comes of course from the pen of James Thomson. His now infamous ode, 'Rule, Britannia!' embodies the mid-eighteenth century ideology that associates freedom with British shores:

The nations, not so bless'd as thee,
Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall;
While thou shall flourish great and free,
The dread and envy of them all. (Thomson, 7)

Thomson imagines 'guardian angels' (Thomson, 4) claiming Britain for Heaven's own as it rises out of the 'azure main' (Thomson, 2) in a way that has parallels with Barbauld's poem, in which Liberty 'mark'd' Corsica 'for her own' (84) when first

This isle emerging like a beauteous gem
From the dark bosom of the Tyrrhene main
Rear'd its fair front[.] (82)

The significant difference between Thomson's ode and Barbauld's poem is of course that Barbauld's site of freedom is not her own country but a distant island, which suggests a crucial distinction between Barbauld's politics and those of her male predecessors.

While Pope, Collins and Thomson are all able to envisage Britain as an embodiment of freedom, Barbauld struggles to conceptualise it in this way. The only indication in the poem that she may perceive Britain as a model for the cause of freedom appears in line seventeen, but Barbauld uses distancing tactics in her description of Britons 'kindl[ing] at a fire so like their own' (17) making this not a statement but a rhetorical question and in the next sentence appears to attribute these 'thoughts' (18) to James Boswell. In fact throughout the poem Barbauld displaces the Augustan vision of Liberty wholly onto Corsica's shores so that that island and not Britain becomes the embodiment of freedom. This significant change may be a consequence of a historically changed political ideology; Barbauld is writing thirty years or more after Thomson, Collins and Pope, at a time when optimism about British democracy had somewhat diminished and the Whig government was perceived by many as having

failed to stand by its principles. However, in his lengthy blank-verse poem *The Task*, published in 1785 - some sixteen years after 'Corsica' was completed - William Cowper, while criticising British commercialism and avaricious colonial greed, is still able to imagine freedom as resident in these shores; he writes of Britain 'Thee I account still happy, and the chief/Among the nations, seeing thou art free' (Cowper, 460). Here we have a poet writing in the last quarter of the eighteenth century who continues to imagine freedom as almost uniquely British and he makes clear the personal significance of this nationalist belief :

....I could endure
Chains no where patiently; and chains at home,
Where I am free by birthright, not at all. (Cowper, 477)

These lines give us a clue as to why Barbauld displaces freedom onto Corsica, making not Britain but a distant island the embodiment of Liberty. Barbauld, as a woman in the eighteenth century does not inhabit the same ideological or political space as the male poets of the period. Her conceptualisation of freedom is shifted elsewhere because while she wants to celebrate the concept of Liberty, living as she does with virtually no political voice and few legal rights, she is not 'free by birthright' in her own country and cannot imagine freedom realised in British shores.

The island of Corsica becomes the first of many displacements of freedom to be found in Barbauld's poetry. The island is figured as an embodiment of Liberty and yet its territories are where the darker side of the European Enlightenment agenda, the colonising and exploitation of the natural world, are enacted. This colonisation takes on a gender significance in the poem since the natural world is feminised in a way which seems to exceed the conventional gendering of the abstraction 'Nature' as feminine. The landscape of the island suggestively takes on the attributes of a female body with its 'deep indented shores' (35), 'swelling mountains' (48), 'wildly spread[ing]....scarlet fruit' (59) and 'ample harbours, which inviting stretch/Their hospitable arms to every sail' (39). Barbauld explores this geographical and physical territory in minute detail, spending some forty-one lines tracing its contours and even describing its botanical features:

....the shining box,
And sweet-leaved myrtle, aromatic thyme,
The prickly juniper, and the green leaf
Which feeds the spinning worm. (55)

This intimate involvement with the island is not merely a tactic to involve the reader with the island as a known landscape rather than as an outline on a map, for Barbauld embodies the concept of freedom within this very landscape. As the natural world is so closely linked with the female body, acts of colonialism henceforth have a double meaning; on one level they represent the imperialistic control and exploitation of other countries for economic profit, but on another function as a metaphor for the ideological and social control of women. Eighteenth century women are linked through this imagery to colonised landscapes, suggesting that both are victims of the darker project of control within the European Enlightenment.

It is within this feminised landscape and in particular in its wild and untameable zones, that the female abstraction Liberty, finds her true home. She is figured as a 'mountain goddess' (75) who marks Corsica 'for her own' (84). This representation anticipates the depiction of Liberty during the French Revolution which was for some time modelled on Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt, and on Amazonian women. Marina Warner in her discussion of Liberty in *Monuments and Maidens* argues that in some cases this abstraction is feminised not merely as a consequence of linguistic gendering but because 'lack of constraint, liberation, wildness, are unconsciously aligned with the wild itself, with the world outside society' and those 'who dwell in that natural domain, like huntresses and Amazons, develop a closer association with the wild and its energies'.³² Barbauld develops an Amazonian construction of Liberty but some twenty years before it would become part of popular imagery with the French Revolution, and unconscious also of the fact that she herself would later be aligned with an image of Amazonian lack of constraint in less favourable terms by Richard Polwhele. Barbauld's depiction of Liberty in this poem might suggest that she saw the image of the Amazonian woman, much satirised in the eighteenth century, as offering a more positive role model for women.³³

Against this vision of nature where Liberty resides with its ‘savage forests, awful, deep’ (63), ‘tangled thickets’ (64), and ‘tumbling torrents’ (70), is set another kind of natural landscape: ‘The green enamel’d vales, the velvet lap/Of smooth savannahs’ (78), and these we are told Liberty ‘scorns’ (77). It is not merely nature which is celebrated as the home of Liberty in the poem but specifically the wild and untamed natural world. This imagery can be read in two ways. In gender terms it suggests, since both the wild untamed natural landscape and the ‘velvet lap/Of smooth savannahs’ are feminised, that Barbauld is setting up a distinction between women who reject stereotypical feminine roles and support the cause of freedom, and those who value luxury and beauty, and thus contribute to the exploitation enacted overseas for their comforts. This imagery hints at the complexity of Barbauld’s gender politics, a complexity which becomes more apparent in her later poems in which she focuses on and critiques certain kinds of ‘feminine’ behaviour.³⁴ This discrepancy in Barbauld’s representations of nature is also however, analogous to the split in allegiance to classical civilisation which the poem exhibits. Barbauld rejects the model of high ‘imperial Rome’ (91), perceiving Corsica’s sons rather as the natural descendants of a more primitive ‘ancient Greece’ (87). This distinction is significant in terms of eighteenth century neo-classicism and in understanding the politics of Barbauld’s own use of classical forms. Recent critics have suggested that there was more than one neo-classicism taking place in the eighteenth century, and that while Pope’s version maintained an adherence to the arts of imperial Rome, a later movement was marked by a support for the art and values of ancient Greece, and set itself in opposition to the former. It is argued that this later ‘Neo-classicism was a part of Enlightenment questioning of established authority’ and that it manifested itself in ‘a taste for the primitive in general, whether it was classical or mediaeval, whether it was of the dark ages or the geographically remote’.³⁵ In terms of this poem Barbauld not only rejects ‘the dread sceptre of imperial Rome’ (91) in favour of the ‘generous stock/Of ancient Greece’ (86), but she also displaces her vision of Liberty onto a landscape which is both primitive in its wildness and geographically far removed. Within the discourses in which her writing must be situated, Barbauld may have been signalling her critique of the politics of a neo-

classicism which took as its model the arts produced by a despotic and colonising imperial Rome.

The confident and intelligent way in which Barbauld addresses the political in this poem in itself undermines recent constructions of late eighteenth century women's poetry as merely domestic and sentimental, as too does Barbauld's refusal to shy away from the necessity of war, which she celebrates here as a 'glorious conflict' (98) and defends as a necessary precursor to freedom. This argument puts into context the anti-militaristic message of many of her later poems, since what she critiques elsewhere and validates here is not the act of war *per se*, but the political motives which lie behind it. She criticises war and acts of militarism not for reasons of female sensibility but only when these are entered into for the purpose of colonial expansion or tyrannical oppression, and she supports conflict not in the pursuance of predictably nationalistic causes, but when the cause of freedom is jeopardised. Here she argues that freedom

....must be seized
By that bold arm that wrestles for the blessing;
'Tis heaven's best prize, and must be bought with blood. (140)

Rather than drawing away from the details of battle, she lingers over them and discusses the conflict in celebratory terms, since it is fought in the name of that which she is shown to value above all else in her poetry: freedom. In these descriptions the bloodshed serves to remind the reader that the abstraction Liberty stands for a concept of freedom which has real physical implications for the islanders. 'Virtue' presides over the conflict; we are told that she 'triumphs' (146) as she 'exulting, rides the storm,/And joys amidst the tempest' (150). Like Liberty, Virtue is feminised, figured as a massive Bodicean figure revelling in war, as 'her towering form/Dilates with kindling majesty', and both abstractions function to counter conventional images of women as weak and powerless.

Although the poem presents us with these strong feminised figures there are problems in the gender politics of the poem since 'Freedom the cause' is associated also with PAOLI the chief' (132). Barbauld's representation of General Paoli

appears to overwhelm the power of the feminised figures; he is depicted as 'the godlike man' (183) whose 'sacred name' (179) is 'consecrate[d]/To after ages and applauding worlds' (181). This deification of the 'Man' (107) Paoli is echoed in Barbauld's later representations of other male figures, notably Joseph Priestley and John Howard the prison reformer - whose statue figures in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* as a shrine where tourists pray. While there appears to be something very problematic in this idolisation of certain male Enlightenment leaders, their near deification actually functions to elide the question of their biological sex and in their proximity to God, they are less like men. In a sense these male figures function as the counterpart to the God who appears in 'A Summer Evening's Meditation', who is humanised, or rather feminised, out of his omniscience. In an analogous move these men are deified out of their masculinity, which allows Barbauld to appropriate them for her feminised cause of freedom.

The freedom which the Corsicans battle for is imagined in very physical terms and Barbauld depicts a force wresting itself free from oppression in a description which shows liberty to be valued above everything, even life itself:

It is not in the force of mortal arm,
Scarcely in fate, to bind the struggling soul
That gall'd by wanton power, indignant swells
Against oppression; breathing great revenge,
Careless of life, determin'd to be free. (102)

Barbauld exhibits a sense of involvement in the struggle for freedom by intervening at this point and giving it her personal seal of approval. She speaks directly in the poem and adds a statement of shared desire:

....A British Muse,
Though weak and powerless, lifts her fervent voice,
And breathes a prayer for your success. (133)

The figuring of the female muse as 'weak and powerless' belies the confidence with which her poem has proclaimed for freedom, and is subtly undermined by the powerful feminised figures of Virtue and Liberty. It does however, function to link Barbauld on a personal level with Corsica's struggle against oppression in the final appended eighteen lines of the poem describing their overwhelming defeat by the

French which, through the deployment of natural imagery, is imagined in gendered terms:

....So strives the moon
In dubious battle with the gathering clouds,
And strikes a splendour thro' them; till at length
Storms roll'd on storms involve the face of heaven
And quench her struggling fires. (188)

Barbauld's gendered weakness is covertly linked to Corsica's geo-political weakness. The island, like the weak muse has no opportunity to do battle with equals and is merely 'o'erwhelm'd' (187) by tyrannical forces.

The only freedom left to imagine for Corsica at the end of the poem is the freedom Barbauld advocates for women in these early poems, that of the mind and the intellect:

There yet remains a freedom, nobler far
Than kings or senates can destroy or give;
Beyond the proud oppressor's cruel grasp;
Seated secure; uninjur'd; undestroy'd;
Worthy of Gods: The freedom of the mind (197).

There is a note of continued criticism of the British government in the description of Corsica's defeat, since Barbauld reminds us that the island fought 'unaided' (188), and her very general attack on 'kings' and 'senates' suggests that her critique is of a male-centred European establishment, not just the French government. This gift of a mental freedom, like Corsica's political weakness, allows her to identify with the country's plight all the more. She makes clear however, that this mental freedom is compensatory, it is what 'yet remains' when all else has been denied, and yet it is in Barbauld's terms a significant freedom since it cannot be controlled or denied from without in the same way as political and social liberties.

In this, Barbauld's first foray into an overtly political public arena, she is forced to return to the personal, private sphere for her final conceptualisation of freedom. William McCarthy writes of this poem that Barbauld 'smuggles her personal themes' into the text 'under the label of public discourse' (McCarthy, p. 123) in a way which

does not seem to take account of the problematic nature of public discourse itself for women and Barbauld's achievement in entering that realm at all. I would argue that what Barbauld performs here is rather a refusal to be bound within either category and that this is not so much an act of smuggling, of enveloping one discourse within another - 'a "private," female meaning within a public, political one' (McCarthy p, 122) - as a movement between the two spheres of the political and private. Barbauld effectively uses the concept of freedom as feminised abstraction and in more politically engaged and passionately envisaged terms through her use of the Corsican incident, to produce a complex and multi-faceted political poem. 'Corsica' stands out of the 1773 collection as the natural precursor to the political poems she would write in the 1790s and beyond, addressing as it does a contemporary political issue through imagery which encodes a subtly gendered politics. In her later works, while the political scene without grows increasingly turbulent, the same connections are made within the poems between a freedom which is consistently feminised, and a masculinised agenda of exploitation and oppression, which time and again functions to overwhelm that freedom.

Notes

¹ Quotation taken from *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994). All subsequent quotations from Barbauld's poetry are taken from this edition and page numbers only given in parenthesis in the text.

² *The Works of William Collins*, ed. by Richard Wendorf and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

³ Wollstonecraft stresses the explicit sexual politics at work in Burke's treatise in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and recent critics, most notably Anne K. Mellor, have identified Burke's categories of the sublime and the beautiful as gendered respectively masculine and feminine. See Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), especially Chapters Five and Six.

⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 111.

⁵ William McCarthy, “We Hoped the *Woman* Was Going to Appear”: Repression, Desire, and Gender in Anna Letitia Barbauld’s Early Poems’, in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 113-137 (p. 123).

⁶ In his poem ‘L’Allegro’ Milton describes the allegorised figure of ‘Mirth’ as ‘So buxom, blithe, and debonair’ (*Milton: Poetical Works*, ed. by Douglas Bush [London: Oxford University Press, 1966], 24).

⁷ Cited in *A Memoir of Mrs. Anna Letitia Barbauld, With Many of her Letters*, by Grace A. Ellis (Boston: Osgood, 1874), p. 43.

⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 8 and p. 9.

⁹ Marlon B. Ross, ‘Configurations of Feminine Reform: The Woman Writer and the Tradition of Dissent’, in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 91-110 (see especially pp. 98- 101).

¹⁰ Stuart Curran, ‘Romantic Poetry: The I Altered’, in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. by Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 185-207 (p. 197); cited in *Poems*, p. 245.

¹¹ Betsy Rodgers, *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs Barbauld and her Family* (London: Methuen, 1958), p. 57; and McCarthy and Kraft’s notes to the poem in *Poems*, p. 259.

¹² Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 63.

¹³ Patricia Phillips, *The Scientific Lady: A Social History of Woman's Scientific Interests, 1520-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), p. 85 and p. 89.

¹⁴ Hester Mulso Chapone, *The Works of Mrs. Chapone*, 4 vols (London: Murray, 1807), II, p. 202.

¹⁵ Hester Mulso Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind: Addressed to a Lady* (London: Brettell, 1808), p. 100.

¹⁶ *The Poetical Works of James Thomson* (London and Edinburgh: Nimmo, 1878).

¹⁷ Betsy Rodgers notes that Joseph Priestley brought a telescope with him to Warrington when he was appointed as a tutor at the academy (Rodgers, p. 41) and this may have been the instrument which Barbauld was permitted to use. Other evidence of Barbauld joining in with the discourses of astronomy appears in letters written to her son in 1784, in which she describes her stay with Mrs. Montagu and their discussions about Herschel's improvements to telescopes and his discovery of 'three hundred new stars and a new planet or comet' (cited in *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld, including Letters and Notices of her Family and Friends*, by Anna Letitia Le Breton [London: George Bell and Sons, 1874], p. 55).

¹⁸ The original version of this poem with the planet Saturn feminised is the text reproduced in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), although Wu does not note the fact that in subsequent editions the lines were altered. The original lines penned by Barbauld read:

Where cheerless Saturn midst her wat'ry moons,
Girt with a lucid zone, majestic sits
In gloomy grandeur, like an exiled queen
Amongst her weeping handmaids. (*Romantic Women Poets*, 79)

The later lines as amended by her read:

Where cheerless Saturn 'midst his wat'ry moons
Girt with a lucid zone, in gloomy pomp,
Sits like an exil'd monarch. (*Poems*, 79)

¹⁹ [William Woodfall], 'Poems by Miss Aikin', *Monthly Review*, 48 (1773) 54-9 and 133-7 (p. 136).

²⁰ Fernand Comte, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Mythology*, trans. by Alison Goring (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1991), p. 183.

²¹ Julie Ellison, 'The Politics of Fancy in the Age of Sensibility', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 228-255 (p. 231).

²² *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by Lucy Aikin, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1825), I, pp. 237-8.

²³ G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 274.

²⁴ This opposition appears repeatedly in eighteenth century poetry but is encapsulated most famously in Cowper's lines from *The Task*, 'God made the country, and man made the town' (*The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. by H. S. Milford, 4th edn [London: Oxford University Press, 1959], 749).

²⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 144.

²⁶ See Jordanova's essay 'Natural Facts: A Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality', in *Nature, Culture and Gender*, ed. by Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn

Strathern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 42-69, and her full length work, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989).

²⁷ Medical journals for example worked towards demonstrating that women's brains were smaller than men's, therefore rendering them less capable of intellectual thought. For a more extensive discussion of this development see Elizabeth Fee's article, 'Nineteenth-Century Craniology: The Study of the Female Skull', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 53 (1979), pp. 415-33.

²⁸ Information included in McCarthy and Kraft's notes to this poem in *Poems*, p. 232.

²⁹ *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. by R. W. Chapman, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 327.

³⁰ John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* (1690) laid down the first political ideas of democratic government.

³¹ William Collins, 'Ode to Liberty', *The Works of William Collins*, ed. by Richard Wendorff and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

³² Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1985), p. 281.

³³ Terry Castle notes that at masquerade balls, 'androgynous' costumes 'representing the 'Amazonian' goddess Diana' were 'popular throughout the century', suggesting that in some circles the figure represented a more desirable role ('The Culture of Travesty: Sexuality and Masquerade in Eighteenth-Century England', in *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment*, ed. G. S Rousseau and Roy Porter [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987], pp. 156-180 [p. 163]). Barbauld herself on occasion exhibited less than wholly decorous female behaviour, demonstrating her athleticism on one occasion by climbing and leaping from a tree to escape the attentions of an unwanted suitor (see Le Breton, p. 25).

³⁴ See my reading of *Epistle to William Wilberforce* in Chapter Three.

³⁵ Aidan Day, *Romanticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 75.

A Growing Radicalism: The French Revolution and the Rhetoric of Rights

'A Natural and Inalienable Right': The Test and Corporation Acts

Between the publication of *Poems* in 1773 and Barbauld's next major literary contribution there is, what her brother perceives to be, a quarter of a century of literary silence, although during the intervening years she had written a popular educational book for children, devotional hymns, and private verse for friends. In 1790 however, Anna Barbauld, as she now was, took up her pen and finally answered John Aikin's call for the return of 'Freedom's once-loved voice', bursting not only onto the literary scene but also more dramatically onto the contemporary political scene, with a political tract entitled *An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts*. Both this and a second prose piece which she published two years later, *Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation*, on the question of democracy and war with France, go straight to the heart of contemporary politics. Both texts take as their keynotes the ideals and rhetoric of the French Revolution and focus on questions of liberty, democracy, and human and civil rights. The two essays also function as a touchstone and a context to the political poetry which Barbauld produced in these years.

That Barbauld should return to the literary scene with an essay arguing for the repeal of the Test and Corporation acts is an indication of the continuing primacy of dissenting values in her political allegiances. The fact that Barbauld is intellectually and educationally equipped to produce such an eloquent, ironic and cleverly argued political polemic as this, testifies to the far-reaching implications of dissenting ideology for women. Her entry into the public arena at this fraught point and her extremely sophisticated handling of this particular political issue, should however be regarded as a key factor in the subsequent establishment distrust of Barbauld and her writing. With the publication of this essay she pushes herself to the fore in an angry

and decisive political debate, the consequence of which was that in their public clash with Burke, dissenters would be irrevocably linked with Jacobin politics and as such were subject to establishment suspicion and attack. Burke made the most of the dissenters' basing their arguments for the repeal of the Test and Corporation acts on the notion of civil rights. One historian of the period notes that their

claims to *liberty* of conscience in religious matters, to *equality* of civic status with the Anglicans, and their professions of *fraternity* with the French represented a set of principles which, in 1789-90, could plausibly be misrepresented by Burke as French in origin and revolutionary in implication.¹

Although Burke exaggerated the revolutionary implications of the dissenting case, the line which most of its spokespersons took did turn upon the key ideas foregrounded by the French Revolution and the leading dissenting spokesman in parliament, Charles Fox, closed his address on a distinctly revolutionary note, warning that if the house decided in favour of the Test laws being perpetuated, this 'might....lead to stronger exertions in defence of civil rights' (cited in Goodwin, p. 94).

With her *Appeal* Barbauld not only enters this loaded debate, but does so after the fact, that is after the appeal had been denied in parliament and Burke's depiction of the dissenters as revolutionary radicals had taken hold. By publishing an appeal addressed to Burke and his supporters, Barbauld publicly positions herself alongside a group who were perceived to pose a major threat to British security. This step caused some uneasiness amongst Barbauld's friends, who viewed the action with disquiet. Dr. John Moore expressed in a letter to Barbauld's husband the apprehensions he had felt when he discovered her intention of writing the tract:

I had heard a report of her intending to answer Mr. Burke's famous pamphlets, - and I confess I heard this with some degree of concern, for notwithstanding the high opinion I had formed of her talents, I could not help being a little uneasy at the thoughts of her entering the lists with so formidable an antagonist - but I have just finished the perusal of her address, and all my fears are vanished. I hardly know anything in the English language superior in delicacy of irony, and strength of reasoning, to that truly eloquent performance.²

Moore is rightly impressed by the degree of sophistication with which Barbauld argues her case, but as a friend this blinds him to the fact that writing as a woman, such a display of ability in the political arena would function as a further indictment against her. Not only would dissent be seen to breed revolutionary fervour, but even more subversively, to threaten the whole ideological basis upon which society is built by allowing its women to develop political skills. One reviewer of the tract, on realising that the tract had been written by a woman, exhibited his alarm at this development in a hastily added codicil to his comments:

Since the above was at the press, the author hears with infinite surprise, not unmixed with concern, that the Address to the Opposers of the Repeal is from a female pen!

‘And in such soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage?’³

Barbauld’s transgressions into the political sphere also earned her more personal attacks from the likes of Horace Walpole, a one time friend, who labelled her ‘the virago Barbauld’, turning as Polwhele would later, to the unsexed metaphor for a woman who moves beyond the domestic and private sphere.⁴

Barbauld deploys in the essay, as did Fox in parliament, the rhetoric of rights which were radicalised by the French Revolution. Refusing to beg for the repeal of the acts she instead demands it as a fundamental human right:

gentlemen, we wish to have it understood that we *do* claim it as a right. It loses otherwise half its value....It is time, so near the end of the eighteenth-century, it is surely time to speak with precision, and to call things by their proper names. What you call toleration, we call the exercise of a natural and inalienable right.⁵

Barbauld sounds an apocalyptic note here, connecting her revolutionary claims to the approaching *fin-de-siècle*, but also to the progress of the dissenting Enlightenment:⁶

We appeal to the certain, sure operation of increasing light and knowledge....The spread of that light is in general gradual and imperceptible; but there are periods when its progress is accelerated, and

when it seems with a sudden flash to open up the firmament, and pour in day all at once. (*Works*, p. 371)

In terms of the contemporary moment at which she was writing, both of these passages carry an ominous threat to the establishment which the essay reinforces at its close by connecting the approaching change with the French Revolution itself:

Can ye not discern - But you do discern the signs; you discern them well, and your alarm is apparent. You see a mighty empire breaking from bondage, and exerting the energies of recovered freedom: and England....who has long reproached her with being a slave, now censures her for daring to be free. (*Works*, p. 373)

Here Barbauld openly displays her support for the French Revolution and in doing so confirms what Burke would have as implicit in the dissenting case. She demonstrates her political astuteness by suggesting that it is establishment fear at the prospect of French revolutionary fervour, spreading like a contagion to England, which makes the government so reactionary in its politics. The establishment's 'alarm is apparent' in not only the refusal to repeal the Test acts but also in their attacks on women writers like Barbauld. Dr. Moore is rightly afraid; such a piece of writing could only succeed in marking Barbauld as an inherently radical and therefore dangerous writer.

This essay provides an important contextualising focus for much of Barbauld's later poetry in which she addresses the question of rights in relation to slaves and women, and also the French Revolution itself. It positions her politically as advocating what we would now term a progressive liberalism, but which in her support of concepts such as liberty and equality, at this time positions her alongside much more radical writers and thinkers. The question of rights which the essay addresses may also have implications in terms of gender politics and in her denial of the label 'dissenter' as a category of exclusion, there is perhaps a covert message for women; she writes that 'we want to bury every name of distinction in the common appellation of citizen' (*Works*, p. 361). In writing a tract describing her identification with a group which is excluded from civil office and universities, Barbauld cannot have been unaware that hers is a double exclusion, since she is denied access to these centres of power both as a dissenter and as a woman.⁷

'Long-Forgotten Rights': 'The Poor African'

Appeal marks the beginning of the radical phase in Barbauld's writing which would transform her poetics and in which she is increasingly drawn to questions of human and civil rights. The next piece of writing she published was an abolitionist poem on the slave-trade and the essay points again to her dissenting politics as a crucial factor in her support of this cause; she writes that the unjustice of the Test and Corporation acts had rendered her 'quick-sighted to encroachment and abuses of all kinds' (*Works*, p. 366) and connects the cause of slavery to the wider issue of personal and political liberty:

Liberty, here with the lifted crosier in her hand, and the crucifix conspicuous on her breast; there led by Philosophy and crowned with the civic wreath, animates men to assert their long-forgotten rights....and even extends a smile of hope and promise to the poor African, the victim of hard, impenetrable avarice. (*Works*, p. 372)

The debate over the slave-trade and the appeal for its abolition was however, unlike the Test and Corporation acts, a political issue which was not specific to dissenters or even liberals, but which was also taken up by Tory writers and politicians. Between the years 1787 and 1791, with the exception of the French Revolution, it became the most widely tackled subject in journalism and poetry. The considerable and widespread interest which the slave-trade generated would continue for many years; writing in 1838 a contributor to *The Spectator* makes a useful analysis of what prolonged the subject's popular interest. He suggests that while other political issues appear like lifeless abstractions, 'slavery *proves* itself; its evils are embodied....[i]t has action, actors, and horrors'.⁸ Slavery is moreover according to this writer a 'safe' political area, in popular perceptions if not in parliamentary reality, politically transcendent, and '[i]ndividuals, who are disgusted with the state of home politics, but dare not move in them lest they should "bring in the Tories," find here a safe opportunity to "take an interest in public affairs"' (cited in Davis, p. 346).

In these early years the question of the slave-trade was notably a subject to which women poets were particularly drawn; along with Barbauld several other women composed work on the subject including Ann Yearsley, Helen Maria Williams and

the extremely conservative Hannah More. To explain this phenomenon Marlon Ross adopts a similar argument to that used by the writer in *The Spectator*, but gives it a gender specific inflection. He suggests that as 'guardians of the sociomoral culture', women writers like 'More and Barbauld can write this kind of poetic propaganda without too much censure'.⁹ While it may be true that the topic of slavery, entering as it does the realm of popular politics, provided a relatively safe area of political activity for women, this does not explain why women were drawn to political matters at all in their poetry; nor does Ross's statement take into account the fact that More and Barbauld produce very different kinds of propaganda. As we shall see when we turn to their poems, More's agenda is a largely conservative one, intent on preserving the status quo and speaking from the vantage point of Christian humanitarianism, whereas Barbauld offers a fairly radical critique of British parliament and economics, and argues for a more progressive politics. Before I turn to these poems it is then worth considering alternative explanations as to why women with very different political agendas were drawn to this topic in their poetry. Certainly women's interest in the subject represents something more than what Janet Todd suggests, is a deluge of pity from the female breast as a product of the eighteenth century cult of sensibility; there is in fact a female tradition here, of which More reminds us in her poem, by referring to Aphra Behn's novel on slavery, *Omonoko*, written a century earlier in 1688.¹⁰ This tradition is charted in some depth by Moira Ferguson in her work *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (1992) which draws attention not only to the numbers of women writing on this subject, but to what are now perceived as the problematics of British women's constructions of a colonial Other in their anti-slavery writings.

By the end of the eighteenth century the use of slavery as a metaphor for women's condition in contemporary society was widespread. The image appears again and again in key feminist texts of the period: in her *Letters on Education* (1790) Catherine Macaulay writes that the 'point of corporal strength' was 'in the barbarous ages of mankind,...abused to such a degree, as to destroy the natural rights of the female species, and reduce them to a state of abject slavery'; Olympe de Gouges in her 1791 *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* writes of 'the woman whom a man buys, like the slave on the African coasts'; and Wollstonecraft uses the metaphor repeatedly as a

defining measure of women's legal and social status in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), asking '[i]s one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subjected to prejudices that brutalize them....?'.¹¹ Ferguson does briefly discuss this linguistic connection made by women writers but she suggests that many 'either labeled themselves slaves or labeled their situation as slavery, yet failed to accompany these incriminations with an explicit condemnation of slavery itself'.¹² What I am interested in here is how women writers such as Barbauld write poems which are an 'explicit condemnation of slavery' and yet encode within these poems a gendered subtext. If feminist writers of the period were making overt connections between the political and legal status of slaves and women, then it may be that a woman writer arguing for slaves' rights is at some level arguing for her own.

Ross and Ferguson both dismiss too easily the fascination which the slave's cause seemed to hold for women writers of the period. Barbauld writes in a letter of May 1789 that of all the activities occurring in London: 'the trial, the parliamentary business, and fêtes and illuminations....none is surely so interesting as the noble effort making for the abolition of the slave-trade' (*Works*, II, p. 81). Hannah More was similarly moved by the subject of slavery itself, describing it as 'the most interesting subject which was ever discussed in the annals of humanity', and was sufficiently affected to write a letter to Barbauld expressing her enthusiasm for Barbauld's poem on the subject, in which the two women's political and religious differences are momentarily suspended and replaced by a sense of shared desire.¹³ More writes to express

my delight, my gratitude, my admiration. I cannot tell you how many times I have read it....I thank you for writing so well, for writing on a subject so near my heart, and for addressing it to one so every way worthy of your highest esteem. (cited in Le Breton, pp. 67-68)

The topic of slavery does not 'interest' the male poet Cowper in this deeply personal and emotionally involved way. It was in fact a female friend who encouraged him to write some songs on the slave trade in 1788 as 'the surest way of reaching the public ear'; he obliged, but after penning a number of verses wrote back to her saying 'I shall now probably cease to sing of tortured negroes - a theme which never pleased me, but which, in the hope of doing them some little service, I was not unwilling to

handle' (cited in Davis, p. 369). Wordsworth was similarly dispassionate on the subject, writing of the 'traffickers of Negro blood' (249) in Book Ten of *The Prelude*, that 'this particular strife had wanted power/To rivet my affections' (254).¹⁴ This cool lack of interest is a far cry from the passion expressed by Barbauld and More on the subject, who write not merely from the position of superior benevolence but with an enthusiasm that is infused with personal feeling.

While the subject of slavery brings women together, transcending their party politics, it alienates even further establishment males. Horace Walpole writes angrily to Hannah More:

not a jot on Deborah Barbauld - I have neither read her verses nor will. As I have not your aspen conscience I cannot forgive the heart of a woman that is *party per pale* blood and tenderness, that curses our clergy and feels for negroes...Deborah may cant rhymes [of compassion], but she is a hypocrite. (*Walpole's Correspondence*, XXXI, pp. 361-2)¹⁵

Walpole fails to perceive the fundamental connection between Barbauld's attack on the established church and her sympathy for African slaves, that both rest on the principle of freedom. Ferguson notes that Walpole is responding to the 'political dissonance' between Evangelicals and Dissenters writing for the slave's cause and suggests that he 'understood only too well where the rifts lay in that apparent but superficial unity' (Ferguson, p. 164). Another way of looking at Walpole's response would be that he didn't understand the shared gender link, which allows More to see beyond political allegiances and join together with Barbauld in a shared sense of injustice.

More's own poem on the subject, *Slavery*, published in 1788 and written at the request of the abolition committee is, according to Ferguson, the seminal text in the construction of abolitionist verse which set the formula for later poems. In places the language of the poem moves away from More's usual note of Christian piety into something venturing on passion:

Was it decreed, fair Freedom, at thy birth,
That thou shouldst ne'er irradiate *all* the earth?
While Britain basks in thy full blaze of light,

Why lies sad Afric quenched in total night? (15)¹⁶

More spends much of the poem however reminding her audience that her discourse on freedom relates only to slaves and not to the political turbulence beginning to make itself felt by this date in France.¹⁷ She makes clear that what she supports is a non-revolutionary, non-Gallic embodiment of Liberty, a 'sober goddess..../In smiles chastised, and decent graces dressed' (*Romantic Women Poets*, 19), against which she sets and spends much of the poem critiquing - with the same slightly hysterical language we find in Polwhele - a revolutionary vision of Liberty:

Not that unlicensed monster of the crowd,
Whose roar terrific bursts in peals so loud,
Deafning the ear of Peace; fierce Faction's tool
Of rash Sedition born, and mad Misrule,
Whose stubborn mouth, rejecting Reason's rein,
No strength can govern, and no skill restrain;
....
Convulsed her voice, and pestilent her breath,
She raves of mercy while she deals out death[.]
(*Romantic Women Poets*, 21; 31)

These lines serve to remind us that at this historical moment all political issues carry a potentially revolutionary subtext. More makes clear in the poem, in a way that Barbauld does not, that what she defends is not freedom *per se*, but the practice of trading human beings for profit on specifically Christian and humanitarian grounds.

Barbauld's *Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq.*, although included by Ferguson without explanation in a chapter examining the poems published in 1788 which adopt More's abolitionist formula, was in fact written and published in 1791, and as such responds to a very different political moment. Like her *Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts*, the poem is written after the fact; as her subheading notes it is composed 'On the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade' and this infuses both pieces with an air of defiance and anger. *Epistle* is in fact more comparable to a section of *A Farewell, for Two Years, to England* by Helen Maria Williams, which was also written in 1791. The abolitionist rhetoric of Williams' poem in lines 153-202 is constructed around the same polemical

framework which Barbauld uses, describing a country imploring in vain and highlighting the slaves' suffering:

Ah, why, my country, with indignant pain,
Why in the senate did she plead in vain?
Ah, why in vain enforce the captives' cause,
And urge humanity's eternal laws?
With fruitless zeal the tale of horror trace,
And ask redress for Afric's injured race?
....
But yet my filial heart its wish must breathe
That Britain first may snatch this deathless wreath;
First to the earth this act divine proclaim,
And wear the freshest palm of virtuous fame[.]
(*Romantic Women Poets*, 153; 197)

What sets Barbauld's poem apart from Williams' however, is the tone of the polemic; while the rhetoric of the argument in 'Farewell' is couched in pleading language, as Williams continues to hope patriotically that Britain will yet stop the trade, Barbauld offers a much more angry and less compromising critique of the British government.

In the first lines of *Epistle* Barbauld politicises the poet's role, placing it alongside church and parliament in the directing of national affairs: 'The Preacher, Poet, Senator in vain/Has rattled in her sight the Negro's chain' (3), and this politicisation of the poetic function - which would later be echoed by Shelley - is repeated further on in the poem when she rejects an idealising pastoral poetics.¹⁸ In this Barbauld has obviously moved a long way from 'Verses Written in an Alcove' in which she repudiated the political. This shift is signalled by a change in the poetic muse, which in earlier poems is figured as weak but here is strong and prophetic, speaking with a 'ready tongue' (11). Like Williams, Barbauld turns to address the events which took place in the British parliament during the debate and echoing her *Appeal*, blames 'Avarice' (25) for the fact that following Wilberforce's address to the House of Commons on April 18 1791, and despite its being seconded by Charles Fox and the Prime Minister himself, the bill calling for the repeal of the slave-trade was rejected by a vote of 163-88. Unlike Williams, however, Barbauld's keynote in her response to this result is one of scorn and anger, arguing that Wilberforce's campaign against

the slave-trade should now 'Cease' (1) since 'Thy Country knows the sin, and stands the shame' (2). She writes bitterly that 'A Nation's eloquence, combined, must fail' (26) reminding her readers that the rejection of the bill went also against the force of public opinion. The abolitionist's arguments are overcome by what Williams terms the 'Interest press[ing] the opposing scale' (*Romantic Women Poets*, 178), but what Barbauld far less euphemistically figures as the deceit and corruption at the heart of establishment politics: the 'flimsy sophistry' (27), 'plausible argument', 'daring lie' (28) and 'artful gloss' (29).

Barbauld's language becomes most passionate when she refers to an incident which occurred in parliament during the debate, when some members of the house laughed on being told the story of an African woman forced to throw her baby overboard after it had been murdered:¹⁹

From scoffing fiends bursts forth the laugh of hell;
In Britain's senate, Misery's pangs give birth
To jests unseemly, and to horrid mirth[.] (38)

A female abstraction is again used in such a way that it offers multiple interpretative layers. Its implications stretch beyond mere convention as 'Misery' takes on the actual persona of the slave mother, her 'pangs' giving 'birth' to the murdered child. Through this abstraction Barbauld is able to import both a female body and a Negro woman into the text in a way which renders their exclusions more marked than if she had incorporated an imaginary female slave woman straightforwardly into the narrative.

While many of the women poets writing abolitionist poetry did include images of women slaves, in official abolitionist rhetoric - that deployed by male politicians in parliament - the slaves' condition is represented through the figure of the male slave, an insistent gendering which is encapsulated in Josiah Wedgwood's cameo of 1787 with its epitaph 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother'. Anne K. Mellor in her essay "Am I Not a Woman, and a Sister?": Slavery, Romanticism, and Gender', formulates an opposition between abolitionist discourse produced by men and that produced by women. She suggests that male abolitionist writers such as Clarkson, Wilberforce

and Cowper attacked slavery as ‘a violation of “natural law”’, since ‘all men are born equal and have certain inalienable “rights”’, whereas the key female abolitionist writers: Hannah More, Ann Yearsley and Barbauld, condemned the practice because ‘it violated the domestic affections’.²⁰ The reason why male abolitionists should be drawn to the discourse of ‘rights’ in their arguments and women not, is left unclear by Mellor, but I would suggest that women found it difficult to deploy a discourse which linguistically and in practice excluded their own gender, and instead they sought to construct a discourse which not only calls for pity, but which with its focus on domestic scenes and Negro women, makes links with their own condition and that of slaves. As Dorinda Outram argues, the abolitionist rhetoric sees the condition of slavery as ‘an affront to Enlightenment ideas that there was some essential equality between human beings by virtue of, precisely, their common humanity’, but in claiming human rights of liberty and yet persistently referring to the slaves as masculine, rights are claimed only for Negro men.²¹ Women both black and white are excluded from the category and denied therefore equal rights. In this official abolitionist discourse women are themselves silently excluded from the configuration of mankind as slaves were from the category of human and this may explain why women’s poetic abolitionist rhetoric is filled with images of African women. In incorporating images of female slaves into their poems at a time when feminist writers repeatedly drew attention to the legal and political correlation between slaves and eighteenth century women, women abolitionist poets, albeit problematically, make claims for their own condition as well.

According to Moira Ferguson, Barbauld was one of the first women writers in the late-eighteenth century abolitionist movement to grant attention to female slaves, since as early as 1781 in her *Hymns in Prose for Children*, Barbauld had incorporated a vignette of an African mother and her children:

Negro woman, who sittest pining in captivity, and weepest over thy sick child; though no one seeth thee, God seeth thee; though no one pitieith thee, God pitieith thee: raise thy voice, forlorn and abandoned one; call upon him from amidst thy bonds, for assuredly he will hear thee.²²

Ferguson notes that while there are problems with a representation of slaves as ‘colonial others who need the “protection” of kind Europeans’, nevertheless ‘by

choosing an African female protagonist, Barbauld restored a gynocentrically-orientated discourse on slaves that stretched back to Aphra Behn and the Countess of Hertford' (Ferguson, p. 133). In *Epistle* however Barbauld incorporates the female slave figure into the text in a much more complex and subversive way, which threatens to close the gap between the European woman abolitionist and the colonial Other, with the women merging in a biological image of female suffering. The personification of Africa as a female body which 'bleeds' (15) allows Barbauld to also make a subtle link between colonised geographical territories and women's bodies. Acts of rape, colonialism and enslavement are shown to be performed on women's bodies, both black and white, and on natural territories. This shared violation and exploitation is reminiscent of the link drawn between women and nature in the problematic images of science in Barbauld's earlier poetry. This metaphoric echo suggests that Barbauld now connects the darker side of the Enlightenment project with the commercial tyranny of European politics.

Barbauld's gendering in the poem is incredibly complex since she also genders Britain female, thus rendering unstable the opposition between coloniser and colonised. In feminising both Africa and Britain, Barbauld may appear to be using gendered personifications in a more conventional way, but when read in the context of the poem as a whole, the attributes she grants these landscapes form a complex commentary on gender roles in the late eighteenth century. Again rather than merely celebrating women *per se*, we find her critiquing certain kinds of female behaviour which she perceives to be partly incriminated in the perpetuation of the darker aspects of European politics. It is significant that when she depicts Britain's role in the slave-trade, this is figured as guilt by inaction rather than direct involvement; Britain is criticised for wearing a 'veil' which hides the Negro's 'constant tear' (6) and for her 'averted eyes' (7). Through this personification Barbauld appears to link Britain's continued involvement in the slave-trade with feminine passivity and non-participation in the public sphere.

Another complex use of abstraction appears later in the poem confirming the idea that Barbauld is critiquing certain female roles. The abstraction 'Beauty' which appears in lines 57-70 works on at least two levels. Hannah More comments

specifically on 'Beauty' in her letter to Barbauld and interprets the figure as representing an actual woman: 'I could not forbear repeating to [Wilberforce] part of the animated description of the unity of barbarity and voluptuousness in the west Indian woman, and he did full justice to the striking picture' (cited in Le Breton, p. 68). This reading of the abstraction gives us a clue as to the way in which abstractions were read in the eighteenth century, not merely as conventional linguistic genderings but often as having specific literal meaning. I would argue however that 'Beauty' also stands for at least one other actual female figure in the poem, a reading which is left open by the use of an abstraction here rather than a straightforward presentation of a slave-owners' wife in the text. Since when this abstraction is played off against the earlier personification and feminisation of 'Britain' it carries a second, more politicised significance. 'Beauty' can also be read as an allegory of certain kinds of eighteenth century women who value luxury and indolence and who take on the feminine role. The figure is 'pale' (57) and 'Diffus'd on sofas of voluptuous ease' (58). Barbauld's description of this figure as 'in body delicate, infirm of mind' (66) would be echoed by Wollstonecraft in her critique of the lifestyle expected of eighteenth century middle-class women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, when she argues that women's 'strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty' (Wollstonecraft, p. 83).

Barbauld's critique of certain gender roles has a political resonance in the context of her poem since, not only does female concern with the domestic sphere and personal appearance lead to women's bodily weakness and ill-health, but it also helps to perpetuate moral crimes and corruption in the body politic. In this sense Barbauld's eighteenth century woman is united through inaction, in 'monstrous fellowship' (61), with the slave owner. This latter reading of 'Beauty' would suggest that Barbauld offers a more positive outlook for eighteenth century women in which they can take destiny into their own hands. By criticising the women themselves who perform the role of femininity, rather than a patriarchal structure imposing that ideology from above, Barbauld hints that women themselves can become agents of change, working to undermine the ideology of separate spheres by their own refusal to be contained in this way. She suggests that women who enact the prescribed role of weakness, indolence and blindness to injustice, help to perpetuate not only their

own enslavement but also that of others. By bringing politics into the parlour in this way, Barbauld challenges the idea that women are exempt from guilt for crimes committed in the public sphere and in doing so empowers women, suggesting them capable of political change.

Barbauld expresses her own political agenda through the disease imagery in the poem which is used to portray the depravity at the heart of British colonial and commercial politics. She moves from the exploitation of African peoples to the expansion of the British empire in India, suggesting that the same moral corruption is responsible for both. In India, the 'gay East' (86), the 'soft luxurious plague' (88) of European colonialism 'springs' (87), having spread from Britain where it has already infested every part. Barbauld's use of disease imagery to depict the project of colonialism and its connection to the slave trade indicates her growing unease with what she perceived to be a product of Enlightenment progress and logic. The diseased centre from which this contagion emanates is London, 'throng'd Augusta' (90). The by-products of Enlightenment progress, London's 'rosy bowers' (90), are shown to be funded entirely by the blood money of colonialism; 'Art's costly hand/Pours courtly splendour o'er the dazzled land' (92), with what is now evidence of the barely disguised, 'shameless front' (97) of 'Corruption' (96). Barbauld sets up the eighteenth century opposition between the corruption of the city and the natural world only to deconstruct it, as 'Simplicity! most dear of rural maids,/Weeping resigns her violated shades' (100). The contagion has moved outwards from London and infects everywhere, country and city alike: 'The spreading leprosy taints ev'ry part,/Infects each limb, and sickens at the heart' (98).

This sense that even the 'rural shades' are infected problematises the earlier opposition established in the poem between Britain's 'rural Pleasure' (72) and the 'shrieks and yells' which 'disturb the balmy air' (81) of Africa, as well as Barbauld's suggestion that in Britain there are still 'heart-expanding scenes' (79) of rural innocence which soothe 'the lone Poet in his evening walk' (74). The fact that Barbauld later suggests that Britain's own rural idylls have been violated, undermines the earlier images of 'cheerful labour' (76) undertaken by 'blooming maids' and 'frolic swains' (77), and introduces a tension in the poem. Barbauld deploys a

distancing tactic from the earlier idyllic descriptions however by gendering the poet who is soothed by such scenes, male. Moreover, there is a note of criticism in her description of this figure who flies 'Far' from the 'sounding lash' (84) and paints instead pictures of rural harmony. This critique and the gendering of the poet male, links that figure to the male poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Samuel Rogers, to whom Barbauld addressed poems which will be explored in the final section of this chapter. In these later poems she critiques the male poets for their pastoral or metaphysical poeticising, which fails to address contemporary socio-political realities.

The poem concludes with a celebration of Wilberforce, the male spokesperson for the cause in parliament, which may be compared with the celebration of General Paoli in 'Corsica'. There is however a crucial difference between the representation of the two men; Wilberforce is not deified but granted sober praise as 'you, whose temper'd ardour long has borne/Untir'd the labour and unmov'd the scorn' (106). The marked difference in the degrees of enthusiasm which Barbauld exhibits between these two men is almost entirely political. Wilberforce as a Tory MP who some months earlier opposed the repeal of the Test and Corporation acts had demonstrated, like Hannah More, that he was not a supporter of freedom *per se*, and fought against the slave-trade on specifically Christian and humanitarian grounds. Barbauld therefore feels no great compunction to celebrate him as a man-God and his individuality is quickly lost amid the 'generous band' (110) who have collectively contributed to the cause of freedom. It is in fact Barbauld herself who retains the position of strength and confidence at the close of the poem in which she takes on a prophetic omniscient voice, casting the cause into the annals of history. This tendency to look to the future would become an increasingly relied upon strategy in Barbauld's later political writings, allowing her to look beyond a present moment in which she is powerless to effect change.

'The Rights of Woman'

Of all the poems which make up Barbauld's oeuvre, perhaps the most complex and problematic is 'The Rights of Woman'. The poem was not published in her lifetime and cannot be dated precisely, but because of its title, as well as its placing in Lucy Aikin's chronologically arranged collection, it is usually taken to have been written in

response to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which was published in January 1792.²³ Although I have argued that Barbauld does address gender politics covertly through the careful use of abstractions and other imagery, this is the only text in which she addresses feminist issues directly. The result is an intricate poem which has been read as highly problematic in feminist terms by late twentieth century critics. The imagery and language of 'The Rights of Woman' are complex and yet the poem claims the distinction of not only being one of the most widely commented on of Barbauld's poems but also of being subject to the most homogeneous interpretation. While other poems have generated diverse and intricate readings, 'The Rights of Woman' is read in the same way by all critics; Catherine Moore, Roger Lonsdale, Marlon Ross, Janet Todd, Donna Landry, G. J. Barker-Benfield, and most recently McCarthy and Kraft, all read the poem as anti-feminist and a direct revalidation of traditional feminine roles in response to Wollstonecraft's polemic.²⁴

Firstly, I want to examine some of this critical commentary and to justify my own reinterpretation of the poem in the face of such an overwhelming consensus of opinion. One notable feature of these readings is that several critics come to the text with the pre-conceived opinion that Barbauld was not a feminist; Catherine Moore notes that Barbauld was 'not notably interested in specifically feminist causes' and Marlon Ross writes that 'the limits of Barbauld's feminism are also the limits of her poetics'.²⁵ As evidence of Barbauld's anti-feminist stance, the most commonly cited pieces of extra-textual evidence are her letter to Montagu on the subject of an academy for girls and her letter to Edgeworth on the women's literary magazine. As I suggested in Chapter One however, the refusals in these letters are often taken out of the context of Barbauld's own argument and the letters themselves not read closely enough for the angry subtext to Barbauld's refusals to emerge.

The most problematic aspect of previous readings of the poem however, is that they argue that the poem validates women's exclusion from the political and reaffirms the ideology of separate spheres. Ross claims that 'Barbauld argues *against* women's rights because she thinks that political demand leads to misshared desire' (Ross, p. 217) and Barker-Benfield describes the 'rejection of politics' in the poem as

'repudiating the case Wollstonecraft made against cultural segregation' (Barker-Benfield, p. 222). What all of these critics ignore is the fact that Barbauld in work produced both immediately before and after this poem, repeatedly challenges women's non-involvement in politics by herself producing hefty political tracts and verse polemic. Janet Todd comes closest to acknowledging the incongruity of the apparent message of 'The Rights of Woman' within the context of Barbauld's other writings, by at least registering some degree of surprise at the poem's apparent meaning:

Anna Laetita Barbauld rather surprisingly took issue with [Wollstonecraft] in a poem entitled 'The Rights of Woman'....The poem begins with the Amazonian, 'Yes injured Woman! rise, assert thy rights!' but it ends rather strangely for a Dissenter, usually opposed to the flights of feminine sensibility: 'Then, then, abandon each ambitious thought,/...In Nature's school by her soft maxims taught,/That separate rights are lost in mutual love'.²⁶

Although Todd notes the strangeness of a poem written by Barbauld which validates traditional feminine roles, this does not lead her to question the standard reading of the text. While the poem may appear to validate such roles and suggest that women's strongest weapons are not political franchise or legal reform but the domestic affections, this sounds a distinctly unlikely note amidst an oeuvre which boasts radical political verse and angry authoritative polemic. This discord and incongruity would seem to justify a closer reading of the text as well as closer attention to biographical evidence.

The title of the poem is what makes it seem likely that the text was written in response to Wollstonecraft's second *Vindication*, that which applied the rhetoric of human rights to the plight of women, but we have in fact no other evidence for this supposition, and so it would be more accurate to see the poem as responding to the more general ferment of ideas at this time and the popularisation of the discourse of rights. Had Barbauld read *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she could not have been unaware of Wollstonecraft's critique of her poem 'To a Lady with some Painted Flowers', but whether or not 'The Rights of Woman' was 'provoked' by Wollstonecraft's 'sneer' as McCarthy and Kraft suggest, remains a matter of some doubt (McCarthy and Kraft in *Poems*, p. 289). Certainly Barbauld placed herself

apart from Wollstonecraft in terms of radicalism; in her letter of 1804 on the subject of the female literary magazine she observed that 'Mrs. Hannah More would not write along with you or me, and we should probably hesitate at joining Miss Hays, or if she were living, Mrs. Godwin' (cited in Le Breton, p. 87). However, there is little sense of actual antagonism registered here towards the, by this date, infamous Wollstonecraft. Nor is there any evidence of personal conflict hinted at in a letter written by Charles Rochemont to Barbauld in 1797 in which he describes having met 'a sister of Mrs Woolstonecraft (now Mrs Godwin is she not!)' and whom he says has 'much of her sister's good sense' (cited in Rodgers, p. 219, [sic]). Indeed on many issues such as the French Revolution and the dissenting case for the repeal of the Test and Corporation acts, Wollstonecraft and Barbauld had been in political agreement. If then this poem is a response to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, it is a complex one which cannot be read simply as what Landry terms a 'parodic verse redaction', of Wollstonecraft's feminism.²⁷ In the face of this complexity, the poem is perhaps more fruitfully perceived not as a direct response to Wollstonecraft's text, which indeed it may not be, but rather to be engaging with the same network of sexual and political discourses to which *Vindication* also responds.

The polemical movement of the poem actually replicates that of a number of Barbauld's bitterest political attacks. I want to suggest that there is a link between the structure of the argument in this poem and that used by Barbauld in her letter rejecting a female academy for women, in her poem to Wilberforce on the slave-trade, in 'Corsica', and in 'To Dr. Priestley'. In all of these cases Barbauld speaks from what she perceives to be a defeated political position and as such advocates an abandoning of the cause espoused. In these texts however she continues to wage war on the enemies of the cause, demonstrating that her abandonment is merely another political gesture in the face of overwhelming opposition and powerlessness. I want to turn again to the text of 'The Rights of Woman' with what Adrienne Rich terms 'fresh eyes', that is, in this instance, eyes which are open to the structural logic of Barbauldian polemic.²⁸

The first lines of the poem read as a clarion call to women which adopts the discourse of human rights: 'Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right! Woman too

long degraded, scorned, opprest' (1). These lines are read as ironic by previous critics since the rest of the poem appears to validate the traditional feminine role. However, I want to suggest that the language used in the poem actually points to these lines rendering the later constructions of femininity ironic. This stirring opening, which makes use of concrete political terms of oppression and social injustice - even hinting at the unfairness of women's legal position when she describes the 'Law' as 'partial' (3) - throws into relief the second and third stanzas in which Barbauld adopts the artificial discourse of sensibility and femininity. She abandons the discourse of rights and tells women instead to 'Go forth arrayed in panoply divine' (5), reminding them of the impossibly beautiful and unearthly role which women were meant to take on, and which stands in such sharp contrast to women's real social and legal position posited at the poem's opening. She goes on to add almost in parenthesis to this instruction, a description of femininity as 'That angel pureness which admits no stain' (6). The language is exaggerated, pointing to the impossibility of the feminine ideal; we have not just 'pureness' but 'angel pureness' which further 'admits no stain'. This description of femininity implies a potentially subversive self-awareness of the feminine role as a social and cultural performance not as a biological given; she tells women to 'gird' themselves with 'grace' (9) and points out that woman is not inherently stainless rather that she 'admits no stain' with its double meaning of allowing no impurities and also keeping quiet about them in order to conform to the image. In terms of the theories of language put forward by Luce Irigaray, such a demonstration of self-awareness could be read subversively as a strategic act of '*mimicry*', of 'assuming the feminine role deliberately' and in doing so making visible the mechanisms at work in that cultural construction by 'an act of playful repetition'.²⁹

The fourth and fifth stanzas of the poem are the most interesting in that they address the question of why the poem abandons the call for women's rights. She argues that women's rights should not be discussed or clearly defined since if they are 'debated' they will be 'lost' (14). Although these lines appear to point to an advocacy of women's domestic influence instead of political franchise, the next stanza makes Barbauld's message clearer. She argues that women can try arguing for their rights with all of their 'wit and art' (17), but that like the 'Nation's eloquence'

(*Epistle*, 26) put forward on behalf of the African slaves, they are doomed to fail. The subtext to this argument is not that women are biologically unfit for equality but that 'Man' is 'treacherous' (19) and 'stubborn' (18). Like the abolitionists in the previous poem facing venal politicians, Barbauld argues that women face an unyielding and corrupt 'foe' in men. She rejects the discourse of rights for women because ultimately she suggests they are always already excluded from the Enlightenment category of human to which those rights apply.

While the poem does abandon women's claim for rights this is done in such a way that it continues to reaffirm Barbauld's feminism, in the same way that *Epistle to William Wilberforce* remains an abolitionist poem even though it centres on the idea of abandoning that cause. This method of arguing becomes a means of expressing anger and bitterness at a seemingly overwhelmingly powerful enemy and the poem points to the ludicrous inequality of women's position. The 'tools' of femininity - 'divine' (5), 'angel pureness' (6), 'kiss' (8), 'grace' (9), 'Soft melting tones' (11), 'Blushes and fears' (12) - are juxtaposed with the range available to men; the images she plays women's softness against are those of war and colonialism: woman's 'Soft melting tones' are identified as her equivalent of the 'thundering cannon's roar' (11), her 'Blushes and fears' as her 'magazine of war', and her 'empire' as the 'breast' (4). There is such a comical dichotomy between these images that it is difficult not to read them ironically, with the extreme violence of the male resort to warfare showing how inadequate women's 'weapons' really are. We also get some sense of the link between man's colonising impulses overseas and his treatment of women at home with man being described as woman's 'imperial foe' (18) who is bid to 'resign' his 'boasted rule' (7).

In the final lines of the poem, Barbauld again uses the technique of looking forward to some imagined future moment in order to transcend the difficulties of the present, suggesting that 'mutual love' will lead to the loss of 'separate rights' (32). The darker subtext to the poem however, renders these lines deeply problematic and works against the traditional reading. Man is figured as woman's enemy and earlier in the poem she advises women so make him 'thy subject, not thy friend' (19). It is difficult to imagine a 'mutual love' existing between women and those who have

been described as their 'treacherous' 'foe'. The idea of a loss of 'separate rights' is also undermined by a poem which depicts women as powerless, with no effective rights whatsoever. 'The Rights of Woman' plays tantalisingly with the discourse of human and civil rights, but what it seems to suggest is that women's position is, if anything, even more hopeless than that of the slave and that women 'never canst be free' (20).

'Doctrines Perfectly French'

Barbauld produced a number of other politicised poems in the 1790s which are usually ignored by critics. Andrew Ashfield for example, notes that '[i]n the 1790s' Barbauld 'appears to have refrained from publishing her political poetry apart from her *Epistle to William Wilberforce* (1791), but she continued to write radical prose'.³⁰ In fact Barbauld continued to write and publish some shorter pieces of political verse throughout the 1790s, several of which engage with the French Revolution, either directly or through reference to its supporters. Being shorter, these pieces are not so highly developed in political terms as her poem on the slave-trade and her later *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, but they do demonstrate Barbauld's continued involvement in the public arena and exhibit a steadfastness in her allegiances despite their increasing unpopularity. The three short poems I will focus on, when examined as a group together with Barbauld's political tracts, *Appeal and Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation; of a Discourse for the Fast, Appointed on April 19, 1793*, all demonstrate Barbauld's continued support for the ethos of the revolution.

The three poems in question: 'Lines to Samuel Rogers', 'To A Great Nation', and 'To Dr. Priestley', as well as the political tracts were written within the space of three years, during a crucial and decisive period in the progress of the French Revolution, which had gone through the relative optimism of the first two years to the growing violence perpetuated by the French Republic and final declaration of war on France by Britain. Barbauld's poems only touch on these changes and crises at the heart of the revolution. Unlike many British Liberals, including Wordsworth and Coleridge, who turned their support away from France after hearing of the atrocities committed in 1792 and early 1793, Barbauld continues to remain loyal to the republican cause throughout the 1790s. Even her brother, while sharing Barbauld's

republican sympathies, declared his decision to retire from the public arena; shortly after the outbreak of war with France John Aikin writes in a private letter:

We are fairly immersed in a bloody, expensive, and I think, unjust war, and we must either lament its success, or rejoice in the calamities of our country. Such an alternative is enough to make one draw off entirely from political discussion, and I do it, as much as the occasional effervescence of *libera indignatio* will give me leave. (cited in Rodgers, p. 120)

This retreat from politics appears in sharp contrast to Barbauld's own response to the outbreak of war, which was to write and publish *Sins of Government: Sins of the Nation*, a political tract which shares her brother's disgust for war, but which makes her views on that 'guilty business' public.³¹

Barbauld's polemic against war and the British government is filled with the same anger which marked her tract on the Test and Corporation acts two years earlier as she refuses to balk from describing the human consequences of political tyranny:

When we carry our eyes back through the long records of our history, we see wars of plunder, wars of conquest, wars of religion, wars of pride, wars of succession, wars of idle speculation, wars of unjust interference; and hardly among them one war of necessary self-defence in any of our essential or very important interests. Of late years, indeed, we have known none of the calamities of war in our own country but the wasteful expense of it....we have calmly voted slaughter and merchandized destruction - so much blood and tears for so many rupees, or dollars, or ingots. Our wars have been wars of cool calculating interest. (*Works*, pp. 400-1)

Barbauld connects war to British commercial interests and sees corruption at its centre. She does not merely talk of wars as abstract political gestures but in terms of their social effects, translating the discourse of war into the concrete, the experiential and the language of everyday suffering which is its result. She suggests that the political discourse adopted by politicians and those in power, functions to evade those social realities which inform and direct her own political agenda:

We should, therefore, do well to translate this word war into a language more intelligible to us. When we pay our army and our navy estimates, let us set down - so much for killing, so much for maiming, so much for

making widows and orphans, so much for bringing famine upon a district, so much for corrupting citizens and subjects into spies and traitors, so much for ruining industrious tradesmen and making bankrupts. (*Works*, p. 401)

The transformation of political discourse into a 'language more intelligible' is not merely a domestication of politics from a woman's perspective. Barbauld's socialisation of politics is much more aware of a whole spectrum of social consequences arising from political actions, and her transformation of this discourse carries with it the radical implications of making the consequences of political implications available to a wider audience. In the previous year, Barbauld had published anonymously her *Civic Sermons to the People*, in which she explained the principles of democratic government in simple everyday language. Here, more radically still, she produces a polemic which translates the effects of the British war with France from abstract patriotism into a simple explication of war's destructive social effects.

Since Barbauld wrote and published *Sins* immediately after Britain's declaration of war with France, it is clear that her attack on war is most specifically directed at what she perceives to be the latest in a catalogue of unjust British hostilities. The *British Critic* in its review of the tract homed in immediately on the radical implications of its argument, terming Barbauld 'this gallicised lady' who 'has recourse to doctrines *perfectly French*' and who adopts 'all the jargon of French republicanism'.³² The reviewer hastened to diffuse the potential threat of its influence by undermining Barbauld's arguments:

As this pamphlet, from the celebrity of its reputed author, and the spirit and ability with which it is composed, has gained a degree of importance not due to it from any solidity in its arguments, we have given it a place proportioned, not to our own estimation of it, but to the expectations of those whom it was meant to serve. But we cannot conclude our account....without pointing out to our readers how fully, notwithstanding all affected disguises, the whole extent of French principles is maintained....[and] in our opinion, she is totally mistaken in her theories. (*British Critic*, p. 85)

Although the reviewer claims to respect Barbauld's abilities, the tone of the review attempts to subtly undermine her intellectual capabilities through a gendered

sarcasm. He terms her a 'Fairy Queen' (p. 84) and a 'good lady', and tells her that her 'countrymen' [my emphasis] 'understand what you do not' (p. 83). Unlike the question of the slave-trade, the French Revolution is an issue which is decidedly not located in the arena of popular politics, and by 1793 to have written expressing support for this cause would have made Barbauld a target for establishment distrust. This continued championing of the Republican cause as late as 1793 provides a useful backdrop to Barbauld's poetic expressions of revolutionary support, produced in the months immediately prior to the publication of *Sins*, and radicalises those earlier poems, showing them to be not just excursions in fashionable rhetoric but founded on genuine belief.

In July of 1791, less than four months after writing *Epistle to William Wilberforce*, Barbauld penned another poem addressed to a male figure, this time to her friend, the poet and banker, Samuel Rogers. 'Lines to Samuel Rogers in Wales on the Eve of Bastille Day, 1791' is in many ways a minor poem; it is certainly a private poem and was not published in Barbauld's lifetime or included in Aikin's *Works* but is relevant and important as an indication of Barbauld's political outlook at this time. In a letter to her adopted son, Charles Aikin, dated January 4 [1793], she expresses her sense of the way in which the political had in these charged years become the quotidian: '[n]ever within my memory, did public affairs occupy so large a space in the minds of every one, or give so much scope to conjecture' (cited in Rodgers, p. 115). 'Lines' is interesting precisely because it demonstrates the way in which Barbauld perceives the political to cross over into the personal, and reveals that by this date she is writing even private poems for friends with a highly politicised content.

The poem, as its full title notes, is written on the eve of the second anniversary of Bastille day. For many dissenting Liberals in Britain, including Barbauld, the fall of the Bastille in July of 1789 symbolised the fall of the old established order and with it, tyranny and injustice. In a letter written in August 1789 Barbauld refers to this event as the 'demolition' of that 'till now impregnable castle of Giant Despair' (*Works*, II, p. 82) and in her *Address* celebrates it as symbolic of a dawning apocalyptic moment:

Her dungeons indeed exist no longer, the iron doors are forced, the massy walls are thrown down; and the liberated spectres, trembling between joy and horror, may now blazon the infernal secrets of their prison house....Millions of men exist [in France], who only now truly begin to exist, and hail with shouts of grateful acclamation the better birthday of their country. (*Works*, p. 374)

In Britain as in France this 'birthday' was celebrated, and in London a commemorative dinner was held at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand where those who continued to support the revolution's ideals met together. The dinners were a public statement of support and as such met with open hatred from the anti-Jacobins. Horace Walpole lashed out again at Barbauld on the occasion of the commemorative dinner, aligning her with key radical figures like Thomas Paine, the author of the *Rights of Man*:

Eleven of these disciples of Paine are in custody; and Mrs Merry, Mrs Barbauld, and Miss Helen Williams will probably have subjects for elegies. Deborah [Barbauld] and Jael [Williams], I believe, were invited to the Crown and Anchor, and had let their nails grow accordingly - but somehow or other no *poissonnières* were there, and the two prophetesses had no opportunity that day of exercising their talents or talons. (*Walpole's Correspondence*, XI, p. 320)

That Barbauld had intended to offer her public support for the revolutionary cause by attending the dinner, is suggested in a letter written to Samuel Rogers on July 13 1791, in which she enquires of him '[w]hat have you to say in your defence for rambling amongst fairy streams & hanging woods instead of being at the "Crown and Anchor", as you and every good patriot ought to be on the 14th of July?' (cited in Rodgers, p. 115). The notion of patriotism here is complex, since it is not support for one's own country which is being expressed, but that of another. Barbauld's loyalties are transposed onto France, in a way which echoes her earlier displacement of freedom onto the island of Corsica.

'Lines to Samuel Rogers' reproduces the language of the letter quite closely but makes even more explicit the argument which she formulates there, that the turbulent political scene demands attention and must not be ignored:

Hanging woods and fairy streams,
Inspirers of poetic dreams,
Must not now the soul enthrall,
While dungeons burst, and despots fall. (5)

These lines are reminiscent of the critique of the male poet in *Epistle to William Wilberforce*, who hears the 'milk-maid's song or hum of village talk' (73) instead of the 'shrieks and yells' (81) and 'sounding lash' (84) of slavery; the male poet Rogers is similarly soothed by 'peals of village bells..../Floating on the summer gale' (10) and fails to hear the 'Tocsin' which 'sounds afar/Breathing arms and glorious War' (11). Barbauld would use the same argument in a poem written to Coleridge in 1797 in which she warns the young poet away from the 'fairy bowers' (28) of his visionary Romanticism, which she describes as 'the maze of metaphysic lore' (34), towards the 'things of life,/Obvious to sight and touch' (11). In the later poem Barbauld suggests that, like her own fairy cell in 'Verses Written in an Alcove', these are imaginary spaces where the mind 'Rests for a space' (28) but from which it should move on, particularly when external political forces demand it. It is perhaps significant that all three of these poets are male and contrast with the implied poetic presence of Barbauld in these poems, a female poet who in focusing on the political sets herself up in opposition to these male poets who do not. Such a contrast is fairly radical in its implications, since it transgresses the eighteenth century alignment of men with the public world of politics and women with the private world of the imagination.

In all three poems Barbauld demands not only a political awareness but also a politicised poetics, and in 'Lines' she calls upon Wales' own music, the 'Harps of Mona' (17) to 'relate' (19) these 'Eventful scenes so big with fate' (20). Although she does not deny the role of the imagination and the value of nature poetry, Barbauld consistently argues that the present historical moment demands that the poet write with a political agenda, and here she actually uses natural imagery as a further expression of the political:

Think, when woods of brownest shades
Open bright to sunny glades;

Such the gloom, and such the light,
Of Freedom's noon, and Slavery's night. (13)

These lines in fact carry the implication that to ignore what is happening in the political sphere and wallow in nature's delights, functions to perpetuate political tyranny. Nevertheless, there is a suggestion in the poem that a poetics of the imagination and the pastoral is still for her a seductive one; the poet must forcibly turn away from 'Hanging woods' and 'fairy streams' (5) which can all too easily 'the soul enthral' (7). Barbauld's use of natural imagery to symbolise the political is a technique which allows her to continue to include the pastoral in her poetry. What has changed since 'Verses', is that for Barbauld now the natural world functions not as an escape from the socio-political sphere, but as a reflection of its horrors.

The lines in the poem which declare that 'the Toscin sounds afar/Breathing arms and glorious War' are echoed in a poem written by Barbauld a year later which expresses support more directly for the revolutionaries. The later poem, 'To a Great Nation: Written by a Lady', and afterwards entitled 'On the Expected General Rising of the French Nation in 1792', is however a much more public piece of writing, which uses the communal form of hymn to address the French nation themselves. This choice of genre in which to encode her support for the French republic is governed by Barbauld's dissenting politics. For Unitarians especially, the belief in freedom from formal dogma transforms freedom itself into an unwritten creed and by writing a hymn to France with all that that country symbolised at this time for dissenters, Barbauld also writes a hymn to freedom. She takes up the note sounded at the end of *Appeal* in which she describes France as 'a mighty empire rising from bondage, and exerting the energies of recovered freedom' (*Works*, p. 373). Like Barbauld's poem on the slave-trade, 'To a Great Nation' was written for a public audience and was published in the *Cambridge Intelligencer* on November 2 1793, taking its place in wider public discourse. The journal also published extracts from *Sins* in the same year, reminding us that by this date Barbauld spoke with an acknowledged polemical voice.

'To a Great Nation' is another example of Barbauld's Gallicised and displaced patriotism. She writes a hymn to France, the 'country' (10), the 'mighty nation' (1),

much as Thomson wrote his earlier ode to Britannia. In July 1792 the Duke of Brunswick issued a threatening manifesto announcing that the *ancien régime* would be restored and declaring vengeance on Paris, and McCarthy and Kraft suggest that it is to this event which Barbauld refers in the lines 'Devoted land! thy mangled breast,/Eager the royal vultures tear' (5), as she sees the revolution in jeopardy of being crushed by the Duke's army (McCarthy and Kraft, in *Poems*, pp. 291-2). France is feminised through this rape imagery and as with Barbauld's gendering of the island of Corsica, this connects the cause of freedom to the female gender and oppression with patriarchal political regimes. By this date, many liberals had grown disillusioned with the revolution, and yet it is clear from this imagery that Barbauld's sympathy remains strongly with the victimised and feminised republic. Throughout the poem she manages to retain France as a symbol of the ideals of Liberty, despite the infamous events which had seemed to challenge that metaphor

During the year in which the poem was written, a number of significant developments had occurred in France bringing the revolution to a crisis point, and leading to Britain's declaration of war on France in February 1793: riots broke out in Paris; the mob invaded the Tuileries and attacked the Royal family, an event which was depicted by Burke as the near rape of Marie Antoinette; and finally, in September 1792 hundreds of prisoners were murdered by the republicans in what became known as the September massacres. Barbauld's poem performs an incredibly clever balancing act between continuing to defend the French republican leaders, while at the same time acknowledging the brutalities of which they were guilty. Barbauld deals cleverly with this difficult situation by referring to the violence in a distant way, and yet refusing to see it as damaging the basic ideal of the revolutionary cause. She tells the republic's leaders to

....wash with sad repentant tears,
Each deed that clouds thy glory's page;
Each phrensic start impell'd by fears,
Each transient burst of headlong rage. (21)

Barbauld's clever use of language allows her to continue to support the revolutionary ideal, and most radically, to excuse the atrocities committed by the revolutionaries. She speaks almost maternally, temporarily abandoning her stance of omniscient

polemicist, and addressing the republicans like suffering children. In a sense Barbauld is less hypocritical than many of her contemporaries who celebrated the revolution for only as long as it was bloodless; by contrast she acknowledges that human uprisings, even if noble in motive, are often marred by anger and fear. Again she uses prophecy as a means of escaping the present difficulties; the poem imagines a future moment at which the ‘conquering banners’ will be ‘furl’d’ (34) once freedom has been won. The prophetic message inscribed in the final lines, in which France ‘rise[s] - the model of the world!’ (36), functions as a subtle critique of Britain, which has by implication relinquished this role, but also as a way out of the difficulty of wanting to support a revolution without dwelling on the violence perpetuated in its name.

Continued support for the revolution in France was fast moving from being an unpopular cause to one which it was dangerous to advocate. As events in France grew bloodier and fear of revolution in Britain increased daily, the British government’s reactionary mood intensified. By 1792 parliament was responding brutally towards any group seeming to present a revolutionary threat by quashing every campaign for reform and trying leaders of revolutionary societies for treason. Amidst this atmosphere there was a tide of hatred towards dissenters, a group who had always been viewed distrustfully by the establishment and who had been subject to bouts of persecution since Burke’s speech of 1790. Barbauld’s close friend, Joseph Priestley was a prominent dissenting spokesperson and as such a key target. In 1791 his home was burned down amidst the frenzy of the Birmingham riots, destroying his library and laboratory. Even after the attack he continued to be bombarded with pamphlets and threats; Barbauld notes in a letter of January 1793 that ‘[a]s to Dr Priestley, scarce a day passes but he meets with some open threat or some anonymous abuse’ (cited in Rodgers, p. 115). This continued malevolence towards her friend prompted Barbauld to write a poem to him in December 1792 expressing her anger at his plight. Although this was intended as a private poem it was taken up as political propaganda by the dissenters and published.

The poem is short and angry, vehemently critiquing those who refuse to challenge a repressive and reactionary government:

Stirs not thy spirit, Priestley! as the train
With low obeisance, and with servile phrase,
File behind file, advance, with supple knee,
And lay their necks beneath the foot of power? (1)

The 'servile' slavish nature of those who blindly support the establishment is scornfully contrasted with Priestley's progressive 'spirit' (1) and 'large mind' (15). Like Paoli and John Howard, Priestley is figured on the side of those who fight for freedom, in his case for a freedom which is both physical and intellectual. The descriptions of his persecution are filled with bitterness towards those forces who repress and crush the progress of that cause:

Burns not thy cheek indignant, when thy name,
On which delighted science lov'd to dwell,
Becomes the bandied theme of hooting crowds? (5)

The 'hootng crowds' may appear to function here as an image of the unenlightened, but those who burned down Priestley's home, destroying his laboratory and library, were representatives of the establishment, a 'Church and King' mob, who acted 'with the connivance of local magistrates'.³³

Soon after this attack Priestley moved to America to escape his persecutors, where he would remain until his death in 1804. Barbauld sees in this crucial moment the end of the present flawed epoch in Europe's history, and adopting her usual polemical strategy tells Priestley to 'Let it be' (11), hinting at an approaching apocalyptic event which would cancel out the 'slander' (13) towards him. Again prophecy is used to express both anger and to offer a way out of the present crisis; she terms the moment a 'passing age' (13) and looks forward to 'future periods' (16):

....that distant day, -
If distant, - when thy name, to freedom's join'd,
Shall meet the thanks of a regenerate land. (19)

This prophetic stance grants Barbauld's later political works a power and an omniscience which it is particularly impressive to find in a woman's writing at this time. Although the vision of Britain as a site of freedom is displaced into the future,

this still remains available to her in fantasy, since the model of France at this stage continued to offer hope. As we shall see in the next chapter, there would come a time when her prophecy on Britain's future is far less optimistic, and her vision of a land of freedom is imagined not in the old world, but in the new.

Notes

¹ Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 68.

² Cited in *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld: Including Letters and Notices of her Family and Friends* by Anna Letitia Le Breton (London: Bell, 1874), pp. 193-4.

³ Cited in *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs Barbauld and her Family* by Betsy Rodgers (London: Methuen, 1958), p. 110.

⁴ *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. by W. S Lewis and A. Dayle Wallace, 33 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press and London: Oxford University Press, 1944), XI, p. 169.

⁵ 'An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts', in *The Works of Anna Lætitia Barbauld*, ed. by Lucy Aikin, 2 vols (London: Longman and others, 1825), II, pp. 355-377 (pp. 359-60).

⁶ Helen Maria Williams uses a very similar millenarian image in her *Letters Written in France* (1790) in which she suggests that the freedom gained by the French will also mean liberty for other groups such as slaves:

The Africans have not long to suffer, nor their oppressors to triumph. Europe is hastening towards a period too enlightened for the perpetuation of such monstrous abuses. The mists of ignorance and error are rolling fast away, and the benign beams of philosophy are spreading their lustre over the nations. (Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France* [Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989], pp. 48-50)

⁷ I comment on the significance of Barbauld's position as a dissenter in terms of her gender politics in Chapter One, and discuss the idea put forward by Marlon Ross, that women dissenters of the period occupy a position of 'double dissent' (Marlon Ross, 'Configurations of Feminine Reform: The Woman Writer and the Tradition of Dissent', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994], pp. 91-110 [p. 94]).

⁸ Cited in David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 346.

⁹ Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 221.

¹⁰ Todd argues that as a consequence of the cult of sensibility '[w]omen wrote feelingly on the slave trade and imprisonment, on the poor, on war victims and on the depressed and repressed' (*Sensibility: An Introduction* [London and New York: Methuen, 1986], p. 60).

¹¹ Catherine Macaulay cited in 'The Enlightenment Debate on Women', by Sylvana Tomaselli, *History Workshop*, 20 (1985), 101-124 (p. 107); Olympe de Gouges, 'The Declaration of the Rights of Woman' in *Women in Revolutionary Paris 1789-1795: Selected Documents*, ed. and trans. by Darlene Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite and Mary Durham Johnson (Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 87-96, (p. 93); Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 262.

¹² Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 25.

¹³ Cited in *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), p. 285); Hannah More wrote elsewhere of Barbauld that 'I admire her talents and taste, but there is

so great a difference in our religious and political opinions that I cannot enjoy her highly intellectual society' (cited in *Henry Crabbe Robinson: On Books and their Writers*, ed. by Edith J. Morely, 3 vols [London: Dent, 1938], I, p. 480).

¹⁴ *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson, rev. by Ernest de Selincourt (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

¹⁵ The term '*party per pale*' is a heraldic term meaning, 'divided by a vertical line through the middle'. See note 14, page 361 in *Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. by W. S. Lewis and A. Dayle Wallace.

¹⁶ *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

¹⁷ Moira Ferguson argues that More's attack on the mob is aimed at 'unruly citizens who presumably are British male and female workers', but which assumes 'a starker significance after the French Revolution' (Ferguson, p. 151). However, although the Bastille would not fall for another year, rioting was already breaking out in France by 1788 causing disquiet to British Tories and it seems likely that More is referring to a more general sense of mob unrest which would include the French model.

¹⁸ Quotation taken from *Poems*, ed. by McCarthy and Kraft. All subsequent quotations from Barbauld's poetry are taken from this edition and page numbers only given in parenthesis in the text.

¹⁹ Information included by McCarthy and Kraft in their notes to this poem, p. 286. The incident was recorded in *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade, in the House of Commons, on....April 18 and 19, 1791* (London: Woodfall, 1791).

²⁰ Anne K. Mellor, "Am I Not a Woman, and a Sister?": Slavery, Romanticism, and Gender', in *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834*, ed. by Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 311-329 (p. 315).

²¹ Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 72.

²² Anna Barbauld, *Hymns in Prose for Children* (London: Johnson, 1781), p. 60-1.

²³ McCarthy and Kraft suggest in their notes to the poem that it was written in response to Wollstonecraft's criticism of Barbauld's, 'To a Lady with some painted Flowers' (p. 289). The poem is also taken by Barker-Benfield to be 'evidently a reply to Wollstonecraft' (Barker-Benfield, p. 266).

²⁴ H. Stuart Page, writing in 1908, also interpreted 'The Rights of Woman' in this way, but suggests that while the voice in the poem 'does not sound like a Suffragette,one instinctively feels that had Mrs. Barbauld been of our own day she would have taken a leading part in this movement as she did in every movement for liberty and equality' (H. Stuart Page, 'A Warrington Poetess: Mrs. Barbauld', *Warrington Literary and Philosophical Society* [Warrington: Mackie, 1908], 3-32 [p. 24]). Lines which suggest that the current unquestioning acceptance that Barbauld was anti-feminist is perhaps a historically specific phenomenon.

²⁵ Catherine E. Moore, "Ladies...Taking the Pen in Hand": Mrs. Barbauld's Criticism of Eighteenth-Century Women Novelists', in *Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670-1815*, ed. by Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens and London: Ohio University Press, 1986), pp. 383-97 (p. 388); Ross (1989), p. 217.

²⁶ Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction 1660-1800* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. 214.

²⁷ Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance: Labouring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain 1739-1796* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 273.

²⁸ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (London: Virago Press, 1980), p. 35.

²⁹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 76.

³⁰ Andrew Ashfield, in *Romantic Women Poets 1770-1838: An Anthology*, ed. by Andrew Ashfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 10

³¹ 'Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation', in *Works*, II, pp. 381-412 (p. 403).

³² 'Sins of the Government, Sins of the Nation; or, a Discourse for the Fast, appointed on April 19, 1793. By a Volunteer', *British Critic*, 2 (September 1793), 81-5 (p. 82 and p. 81).

³³ Jonathon Wordsworth, 'Introduction', in *A Farewell Sermon* by Joseph Priestley (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989).

The Napoleonic Years: ‘Storm[s] of War’ and Dystopian Visions

‘The Great Giant and Monster Buonaparte’

In this final chapter on Barbauld, her political poetic output from the turn of the eighteenth century to her death in 1825 will be the focus of attention, an output which, if slightly diminished in terms of the quantity of political pieces published, was improved on in quality, including as it does her most significant political poem, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* which I will turn to shortly. I begin my analysis however, with the more modest ‘Peace and Shepherd’, a short dialogue poem published in the *Monthly Magazine* of March 1800, which is nonetheless important since it heralds the dominant concerns of her later political poetry: the overarching crisis of a Europe at war, and the gendered subtext to this crisis. I want to suggest that ‘Peace and Shepherd’ can be read both as a response to specific historical events and also, through the gendered imagery of the poem, as a comment on male/female socio-political relations. As Barbauld’s poem on the slave-trade critiques certain aspects of feminine role, so this poem can be seen to critique in subtle ways, the ‘ordinary’ man’s complicity in the perpetuation of women’s mental subordination and physical victimisation. What appears at first glance to be a relatively simple poem, a dialogue between the feminised abstraction ‘Peace’ and the representative Alpine ‘Shepherd’ of the title, reveals on closer inspection, a complex political commentary which works against simple oppositional constructions of power and victimisation.

The poem is written at a time of continued instability and turmoil in Europe. By 1795 the French Revolution had ended, but almost as soon as it was over Europe was once more beset by conflict with the Napoleonic campaigns which would continue for nearly another two decades, during which time Britain was several times under imminent threat of invasion. In a letter written in the early years of the century, while extolling the beauty of the Isle of Wight, Barbauld responds to the

fear of Napoleonic acquisitiveness, writing sardonically: 'I do believe that if Buonaparte were to see the isle of Wight, he would think it a very pretty *appanage* for some third or fourth cousin, and would make him king of it - if he could get it'.¹ In another letter of this period she refers to Napoleon himself as 'the great giant and monster Buonaparte' but ridicules 'alarmist' fears that 'the French are to land in a fortnight, and that London is to be sacked and plundered for three days' (*Works*, II, p. 92). Although Barbauld adopts a tone of levity and unconcern here, her frequent references to the Napoleonic threat suggest that the matter was never far from her thoughts. In the same letter, running alongside the nonchalant tone is the sense that the political climate grew ever more oppressive to her, and she expresses the wish that she could 'lose in the quiet walks of literature all thoughts of the present state of the political horizon' (p. 93). Despite the weariness that the oppressive state of European politics engendered in Barbauld, she never actually succumbed to the desire for escapism and her later poems exhibit instead her continued commitment to politics during these fraught years.

'Peace and Shepherd' responds first and foremost to a specific moment within the European crisis that followed the French Revolution. The Directory, which governed France after the Terror, employed Napoleon to lead its armies and he rose to supreme power in November 1799. Even before this however, he began on a personal, ambitious and seemingly unlimited quest for territorial acquisition. Despite the aggressive and ambitious nature of Napoleon's schemes, most British Liberals looked for a peace treaty with France throughout these years and opposed Pitt's war policies, with the exception of two key periods: 1798 and 1803-5, during which the Liberal 'Friends of Peace' sanctioned and called for a 'defensive war'.² The first of these moments during which Liberals supported war, was in response to Napoleon's invasion of Switzerland in 1798, a move which caused massive Liberal outcry and which was widely perceived by them as the point at which France finally ceased to symbolise liberty and hope, having become instead one of the most tyrannical and threatening powers in Europe. The dissenting minister Reverend James Wodrow, commenting that Napoleon 'has not only destroyed the political, but the civil Liberty of France, & trampled on the dear personal rights of his fellow citizens', lists foremost of his crimes 'the slavish treatment of the Swiss Patriots born to freedom

& independency' (cited in Cookson, p. 172). Switzerland came to be set against this model of French aggression and figured as a symbol of peace and innocence, a status which was reaffirmed in August and September 1799 when the country became a battleground on which the allies fought against the French army. An added piquancy may have been added to the Swiss plight for Barbauld since, during her European tour in 1785, she had discovered relations of her husband living in Geneva on the borders of Switzerland.

As I have suggested, the poem questions and destabilises more conventional sets of eighteenth century binarisms, since it is a dialogue between 'Peace and Shepherd' rather than between Peace and War. Given the period's almost insistent oppositional logic, such a construction can be seen to have negative implications for the reading of Shepherd. The poem is located in a specific historical moment through the political resonances of the geographical setting, which is clearly identified as Switzerland; the dialogue takes place in 'a deep sequester'd vale,/Whence Alpine heights ascend' (1).³ Into this socio-political scene a female figure is introduced: 'A beauteous nymph..../Is seen her steps to bend' (3) by an at first unidentified gaze. Once again Barbauld presents us with a female abstraction that is figured as an actual woman, and the initially conventional representation of a 'beautiful nymph' is undermined by the disturbing description of that figure's appearance in the next stanza in which she appears as a rape victim:

Her olive garland drops with gore;
Her scatter'd tresses torn,
Her bleeding breast, her bruised feet,
Bespeak a maid forlorn. (5)

Although female victimisation and rape narratives were popular in literature throughout the eighteenth century, the physicality of this image: the blood, the dishevelled hair, and the evidence of flight and terror, grant the description a legitimacy beyond convention. The description functions to challenge the glorified images of war which appeared in the British press during these years. Through this abstraction Barbauld again translates the jingoistic discourse of politicians into a 'language more intelligible to us' (*Works*, II, p. 410), but here that language clearly has

a gendered subtext, as military and colonial aggression are linked to acts of sexual violence and persecution performed on women's bodies.

In the stanza following this, the dishevelled female figure identifies herself as '*Peace*' (11) and she describes herself as not only assaulted but pursued, 'From bower, and hall, and palace driven' (9). At this point we discover that *Peace* addresses and applies to for aid, a 'Shepherd', who supplies the initially unidentified gaze in the poem. The until now silent Shepherd speaks and addresses *Peace* as 'beauteous pilgrim' (13) showing himself to be blind to her real condition. He identifies her in terms associated with Burke's feminised category of the beautiful - 'So soft thy voice, so sweet thy look' (15) - entirely failing, it seems, to notice her ravaged appearance. *Peace*, like *Liberty* in '*Corsica*' is feminised and associated with the natural world. However, as in earlier poems a rural retreat is destroyed by aggressive colonisation:

The din of battle roars
Where once my steps I lov'd to print
Along the myrtle shores. (18)

This sense of the natural world being corrupted is also hinted at in the Shepherd's responses to *Peace*'s pleas for help. Rather than offering her succour he instead suggests that she apply elsewhere for aid, to the 'cloister'd saints' (27) of the nearby abbey. While it could be argued that the Shepherd refuses to assist *Peace* because he is already aware of the approaching army, the poem repeatedly shows him to be insensitive, even blind to what is going on around him, so that his refusal of aid seems to stem from an inability to grasp the gravity of the situation. In the response given to this positing of religion as a refuge, the voices of *Peace* and Barbauld merge and we are offered a dissenting critique of the established church as complicit in the 'guilty business' of war: 'Those roofs with trophied banners stream,/There martial hymns resound' (29). Even more ominously given *Peace*'s appearance we are told that 'oft from crosier'd hands/This breast has felt a wound' (31) implicating the church both in the supporting of unjust wars and in women's victimisation.

Read in terms of the Shepherd's refusal to aid *Peace*, the final three stanzas of the poem spoken by the male figure, challenge both the idealisation of rural peasantry

and also seem to hint at the 'ordinary' man's complicity against women/Peace. Shepherd continues to perceive Peace in stereotypical feminised terms, as 'gentle' (33) and one whose 'tones' (34) he would long wish to hear, showing himself to be still deaf to the urgency of her message and blind to her ghastly appearance. At this juncture in the narrative he is, however, made clearly aware of the approaching army - which he 'now' (41) sees and hears - but describes himself as 'helpless' (40) to aid Peace against the 'gleam of armour' (38) which advances, telling her in the final line of the poem that 'I *cannot* shelter thee' (44). Although then by the close of the poem the Shepherd himself takes on the role of victim, having to abandon his home and flock to escape the French army, his repeated refusals to assist Peace up to this point suggest that he was not sufficiently aware of urgency of the political crisis and that he should have acted more decisively in the name of Peace earlier. Moreover, in gender terms he remains unable to see beyond the ideological and cultural constructions of femininity, and perceive the real condition of the female figure in the poem, as battered, bleeding and dishevelled. The links and parallels between political acts of war and aggression, and the mistreatment of women by a masculine establishment are suggested at the level of imagery in several of Barbauld's key political poems. In this poem she seems to elaborate on her gendered criticism, and to suggest that the dual failure on the part of common man to be politically aware and to see beyond conventional cultural constructions of women, also implicates him in this agenda. In the case of Shepherd, rather like that of 'Britain' on the slave-trade, this guilt is one of inaction not aggression, of a blindness to the real condition of women and a refusal to act decisively when peace and freedom are threatened.

In 1803 Barbauld is once more stirred into poetry by the aggression of Napoleon, and she again chooses to speak out at a moment when Liberals in Britain supported a defensive war against the French. Her 'Song for the London Volunteers' responds to the outbreak of British war with France, an event which inspired a number of the 'Friends of Peace' to join the home guards in order to defend Britain against a possible French attack. This defence of war links back to Barbauld's stance in poems such as 'Corsica' and 'To a Great Nation' in which she argues that in certain situations, specifically when freedom is jeopardised, war should be embraced. In her

1803 poem she openly defends the idea of a British war with France, a conflict which is not set in opposition to peace, but in defence of it; the volunteers

....seek not pay or plunder,
They pray that wars may cease;
Their joy is not in slaughter,
For they are sons of peace.

Yet, Frenchmen, dread the onset
When men like these unite;
For they have sworn to perish
Or vanquish you in fight. (13)

The poem depicts a united national desire to preserve the shores of Britain from Napoleon's 'ambition' (22) and in doing so to defend the cause of peace.

Although the tone of these lines sounds nationalistic, Liberals at this time made clear that their patriotism was in fact distinguishable from that which is concerned with glorifying the nation and which lacks 'moral perspective' (Cookson, p. 165). William Roscoe, a dissenter and a friend of Barbauld's suggests that:

True patriotism is a wise and enlightened sentiment, which leads us to promote the welfare of our country by just and allowable means; but the factitious feeling which prompts us to obtain advantages by acts of injustice and oppression, is not patriotism; but the worst extreme of partiality. (cited in Cookson, pp. 165-6)

The Liberal call for war is not only distinguished from the Tory version in terms of its particular construction of patriotism, but also through being figured not as aggressive but as defensive and supported by all classes of society, from the 'desk and counter' (5) to the 'civic feasts and halls' (6), and also - very significantly for Barbauld - by 'Mothers and Wives' (30). The principles of war put forward by Barbauld here are perfectly in line with her advocacy of self-defence in poems such as 'Corsica'. Moreover, although this war is waged against the French, the defence of military action here remains loyal to the inherent values of the recent revolution; as McCarthy and Kraft suggest, this concept of a 'self-defending citizenry was a product of the French Revolution, and British Liberals in 1803 used it to justify resisting aggression by a nation that had, in their view, lapsed from its own ideals'.⁴

Far from rising as 'the model of the world' ('To a Great Nation', 36) as Barbauld had hoped, France had evolved into one of the most aggressive colonising powers that Europe had ever seen. In the early nineteenth century, while many Liberals tentatively turned back to Britain as a defender of freedom, Barbauld projects her gaze beyond Europe in her quest for a symbol of future hope.

'The Intervention of a Lady Author': Critical Responses to *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*

Barbauld's political poetry dramatically reaches its vertex in 1812 with the publication of her impressive prophecy of the fall of the British empire, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*. The poem was critically received with such unanimous hatred by Tory reviewers, and so disliked by many of her close friends, that Barbauld wrote little else for publication politically or otherwise. That the poem was the last she would publish in her lifetime is a supposition which has passed into myth, and which I will address in the final section of this chapter. Undoubtedly, the reviews did hurt Barbauld and she did not put forward any major works for publication after this, even, as Aikin notes in her 'Memoir', laying 'aside the intention which she had entertained of preparing a new edition of her Poems, long out of print and often inquired for in vain'.⁵ *The Quarterly Review*'s attack on the poem and on the character of Barbauld herself is justifiably the most infamous and widely commented on of all the literary reviews of the poem. Barbauld's close friend Crabb Robinson observed in his diary that the poem 'provoked a very coarse and even blackguard review in the Quarterly Review which many years afterwards, [John] Murray told me he was more ashamed of than any other article in the Review'.⁶ More recent critics have compared the review on Barbauld's poem to that which supposedly led to the death of Keats; William Keach observes that John Wilson Croker, the author of the attack, 'resorts to sneers even more patronizing' than those in his infamous 1818 review of Keats' *Endymion* and Duncan Wu writes that 'Keats was the poet commonly thought to have been killed by a review...in fact, the poet Croker really dispatched was Barbauld, and her fate remains one of the tragedies of romantic literature'.⁷

It is worth turning again to Croker's and other reviews of the poem, to uncover the causes of so much male critical anxiety and to understand just how radical the poem

appeared to Barbauld's contemporaries. It is unsurprising that the *Quarterly*'s attack produced at the time, and still generates, much attention; it was indeed an attack of unprecedented severity even for a Tory journal and what is of most interest here, takes on board certain gender assumptions as the main justification of its bitter abuse. Barbauld is accused of 'miserably' mistaking 'both her powers and her duty' in crossing over from the acceptable production of children's literature to political satire, in 'exchanging the birchen for the satiric rod, and abandoning the superintendance of the "ovilia" of the nursery, to wage war on....statesmen, and warriors, whose misdoings have aroused her indignant muse'.⁸ The gender crimes she has committed in writing this poem are pursued and hammered home: '[w]e had hoped, indeed, that the empire might have been saved without the intervention of a lady-author' but 'a confident sense of commanding talents - have induced her to dash down her shagreen spectacles and her knitting needles, and to sally forth' (Croker, p. 309). The article concludes with a cruel dismissal of Barbauld's, by this date, significant contribution to literature (a punishment for her crime?) and a warning to her not to dabble again in realms from which her gender forbids her; Croker suggests that while her former works for children and her religious writings, 'though they display not much of either taste or talents', at least belong to women's proper sphere of interests and are therefore 'something better than harmless', but, he continues, with the air of a man speaking for the establishment, 'we must take the liberty of warning her to desist from satire....and of entreating, with great earnestness, that she will not, for the sake of this ungrateful generation, put herself to the trouble of writing any more party pamphlets in verse' (Croker, p. 313). Earlier in the article Croker makes what Keach terms a 'coarse mistake' (Keach, p. 569) when he refers to the widowed Barbauld as 'this fatidical spinster' (Croker, p. 309), but the 'mistake' is a telling one. In writing *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* Barbauld has transgressed into the sphere of male politics, a sphere which was by this date very closely guarded by a repressive and reactionary British establishment, and in doing so has unsexed herself, transformed herself from the matronly Mrs. Barbauld - writer of children's books and devotional hymns, literature which the male establishment can dismiss as 'harmless' - into a political writer and a vexed, crotchety old 'spinster'.

Although Croker's review was the most damning of the attacks on Barbauld and her poem, it was not by far the only cruel attack. The *Universal Magazine* also used the opportunity of commenting on the poem to dismiss Barbauld and her entire literary output. The reviewer describes her as 'one of those writers who acquire a sort of celebrity for negative merits; that is, for the absence of all glaring faults, with an equal absence of all striking excellencies', a writer of a kind whose 'reputation....commonly descends with them to the tomb'.⁹ The *Anti-Jacobin Review* also offered scathing criticism, taking to task not only Barbauld's poem but also the *Monthly Review*, a dissenting journal which reviewed *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* relatively favourably. It suggests that the *Monthly Review*'s 'eulogies....would never have been bestowed upon that lady, had it not been for her good fortune to have been bred and educated a Dissenter'. Nor, the *Monthly Review* could have retaliated, would the *Anti-Jacobin* have been so harsh on Barbauld's poem were it not for that very same reason. The *Anti-Jacobin Review*'s main line of critique of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is the poem's prophetic tone, a tone which had come to dominate Barbauld's political poetry and about which the article grows increasingly sarcastic, concluding that 'had we not a sovereign contempt for the prophetic powers of Mrs. Barbauld....we should be too much depressed in heart and spirit, to make a single comment on her desponding poem' (*Anti-Jacobin Review*, p. 209). Although, as I have shown, Barbauld uses prophecy in her political poems written throughout the 1790s as a strategy by which she could imagine a way out of a political impasse, she had never deployed this strategy to depict such a fully imagined future. In this poem prophecy is used not merely as a strategy of escape but to offer a damning critique of British politics, as she sees to the roots of the country's corruption. To depict so vividly and with such authority a vision of a Britain in ruins, could only be interpreted as threatening to a male establishment almost brought to its knees by the ambitious international policies of the French Republic's successors.

While it may not seem particularly surprising that a high Tory journal like the *Quarterly* should attack this poem, since the editor Gifford was, as Betsy Rodgers notes, 'well known for his intolerance towards even the mildest liberal views and in particular for his hatred of women writers', this does not explain why even Barbauld's own friends reacted against the poem.¹⁰ To understand why Barbauld's

close friends, such as Crabb Robinson, expressed a strong dislike of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, however, we must turn to the same set of gender assumptions which inform Croker's attitude. Crabb Robinson's commentary on the poem is marked by an expression of unease about its prophetic and philosophic tone:

I certainly wish she had not written it....[f]or the tone and spirit of it are certainly very bad. She does not content herself with expressing her fears lest England should perish in the present struggle; she speaks with the confidence of a prophet of the fall of the country as it she had seen in a vision the very process of its ruin....The poem is principally offensive from the want of philosophic spirit, and from a sort of arrogant determining of the fate of nations without any authentication by sagacious remark of the right even to guess at the probable issue....there is a narrowness of idea which will expose her to the charge of presumption in assuming the character of a philosophic poet or that of a prophetic 'Elegyist'. (*On Books*, pp. 63-4)

Crabb Robinson manages in this short commentary on his friend's poem to call it 'offensive', 'arrogant', and exhibiting a 'narrowness of idea', and like Croker he attacks Barbauld's transgressions into powerful public discourses, in particular her speaking with 'the confidence of a prophet' and her 'presumption in assuming the character of a philosophic poet'. Both of these categories, prophecy and philosophy, are high genres and therefore unsuitable for a woman writer. In focusing on them Crabb Robinson betrays a shared gender ideology with Croker and the other Tory reviewers.

Another of Barbauld's close friends, Maria Edgeworth, while reacting strongly to the *Quarterly*'s damning attack, responds less strongly in favour of the poem itself and exhibits traces of the same ideology. In a letter to Barbauld she describes the 'indignation' and 'disgust' she felt on reading Croker's assessment, and declared that 'so ungentlemanlike, so unjust, so insolent a review I never read'.¹¹ On the subject of the poem itself however she remains strangely silent, avoiding personal comment by suggesting that the lines under attack by the *Quarterly* 'speak for themselves' and returning quickly to the safer ground of the review's personal attack on a friend: 'it is not their criticism on your poem which incenses me, it is the odious tone in which they dare to speak of the most respectable and elegant female writer that England can boast' (cited in Le Breton, p. 157). These lines suggest that Edgeworth to some

extent shared Croker and Crabb Robinson's criticisms of the poem. Her description of Barbauld as a 'respectable' and 'elegant female writer' seems an attempt to reinvest her poetry with acceptable feminine characteristics away from those of satire, prophecy and philosophy.

Later commentators on Barbauld's life and works were inclined to attempt to excuse the poem and attribute its 'faults' to the fact of its being written in the aftermath and years of mourning following her husband's death. Anna Le Breton writes in her 1874 memoir of Barbauld that '[a]t the end of the year 1811, a very gloomy period, Mrs. Barbauld wrote a poem bearing that name, which unfortunately reflected too much of the despondency of her own mind, and drew down many severe remarks' (Le Breton p. 155). Jerom Murch noted in 1877 that when writing *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* 'her mind had not regained its usual healthy tone' and that 'the Poetess certainly committed an error of judgement in founding on a few military reverses predictions of the permanent decline of the country'.¹² Betsy Rodgers, writing in 1958, was still arguing that the poem was 'overcast' by Barbauld's 'own despondency' (Rodgers, p. 139). All of these biographers follow the same line as the early Tory reviewers in critiquing the poem, the only real change is that Barbauld is no longer openly attacked but is instead, even more insidiously, excused on the grounds of mental ill-health.

Despite the wealth of adverse criticism written about this poem, there were some more favourable responses. The *Monthly Review*, as I have suggested, offered some tentative praise, but the most favourable and interesting, review and discussion of the poem by far is offered by the *New British Lady's Magazine* (hereafter abbreviated to *NBLM*) of 1815, the significance of which McCarthy and Kraft dismiss rather too easily as the result of a changed historical perspective: '[i]n 1815 - after the Battle of Waterloo - the newly founded *New British Lady's Magazine*....could afford to demand a fair hearing for ALB'.¹³ This review however does more than 'demand a fair hearing for the poem', and states with regard to certain key passages that, 'we know of nothing superior....among modern poets'.¹⁴ Moreover, McCarthy and Kraft's implication that after the Battle of Waterloo Britain returned to a state of Liberal complacency is clearly unfounded, particularly since throughout the nineteenth

century and over half way into the twentieth, the poem was still viewed distrustfully by critics.

What McCarthy and Kraft seem to miss about the review in *NBLM* is its significance in gender terms. The review describes *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* as the poem which has, more so than any written by Scott or Byron, 'occupied the chit-chat of the drawing room in a degree sufficient to render its immediate notice imperatively necessary' (*NBLM*, p. 319). Although the phrase 'chit-chat of the drawing room' has demeaning connotations, it also has important implications. It suggests that women were in fact discussing political issues within their domestic 'drawing room' spheres, and that through the medium of literature the political crosses over into the domestic. *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is significant for women readers at this time, since it grants them access to the political through a language and philosophy which they could understand and share. The reviewer notes this shared agenda:

Her theme is serious; and some may think her strains too melancholy, and her visions of her country's future fate too gloomy. Be they so. Too much of excitement to the slaughter of our species, by flattering views of false glory, has England now received, to leave in the minds, even of the most martial among us, any apprehension of a counter-spirit of peace, reason, and religion. (*NBLM*, p. 319 [*sic*])

Although explicitly gendered terms are not used, these lines, placed as they are in a 'Lady's Magazine' and describing the poem's inclusion in a 'Lady's Cabinet of Literature', suggest a specifically female reaction to what Barbauld repeatedly depicts as a masculine agenda of exploitation and military aggression. Although in Barbauld's poems such a counter-discourse is not set up as exclusively female, including as it does such figures as Priestley and Howard, these lines do suggest that Barbauld's poem was read in some women's circles as offering a female alternative that is defined in terms of 'peace, reason, and religion', a drawing room ideology which appropriates the masculinised discourse of the rational to set alongside other more traditional feminised discourses. Thus the women readers of *NBLM* and those who contribute to its pages are able to construct their own political agenda with the help of poets like Barbauld who cross over into spheres previously claimed

by men. This new female ideology is dynamic in that like Barbauld's own politics, it stands actively in reaction to, rather than as the passively defining 'other' of the dominant masculine ideology.

What I want to address in my reading of the poem are the aspects of the text which the *NBLM* demonstrates are available to the reader: the gendered critique of British international politics and a strong counter-narrative to the imperialistic, militaristic, and nationalistic message running through much literature of the period. This narrative may be defined as female in that it is written by a woman and acknowledged by women to be a shared desire. I want to place this narrative within the context of the question of the European Enlightenment, which appears so problematically in Barbauld's early poetry, and to suggest that she presents here a vision of the failure of that movement, expressed through the image of a light moving away from the shores of Europe - as it once moved away from the ancient civilisations - to the New World, where she projects her hope for the future, leaving Britain literally in ruins. Incorporating as it does this vision, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is Barbauld's most transgressive intervention in politics through her poetry, and one of the best examples from the period of a woman finding a voice which was denied her by the culture in which she wrote: an omniscient, prophetic, philosophical political voice. The *NBLM* made its own prophecy upon *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, that it was a poem which 'not Fashion merely, but Fame herself, shall own' (p. 319). With a line of male critics descending from the likes of Croker devising our literary canons this was unlikely, and has indeed until recently proved unfounded. However, with the recent scholarly edition of Barbauld's works and one of the latest anthologies of Romantic women's poetry including the first complete and unabridged versions of the poem to be published in Britain for more than a century, it is possible that we are on the threshold of this prophecy being realised.¹⁵

Dark Visions: The Failure of the European Enlightenment

Barbauld wrote *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* in heroic couplets, a form which carries with it a neo-classical authority that she probably felt her sweeping subject, the rise and fall of empires, and her act of transgression required. It is by far the longest of all her poems, running to some 334 lines. The argument of the poem itself however,

is made up of four distinct stages which form an impressive contextualisation of the contemporary political situation within a historical overview of world civilisations. The first stage of the argument is a critique of war and a description of the current state of the Napoleonic conflict, and runs from lines 1-38; the second, running from lines 39-112, critiques more specifically Britain's role in the European wars and begins to prophesy her doom; the third section of the poem from lines 113-214, that most often focused on by critics, and indeed, often discussed metonymically as standing for the poem as a whole, imagines a future moment when Britain will lie in ruins as Rome does now and be visited by American tourists; the final section, running from line 114 to the end, is where Barbauld's poetic vision grows most omniscient, where she philosophises and prophesies through looking at past patterns of the growth of civilisations and their decline, that the next great empire will be the New World. I want to retain the structural logic of Barbauld's argument and so will address each of these sections in turn in my analysis of the text.

The first section of the poem addresses the political condition of Europe which was little changed since Barbauld published 'Peace and Shepherd' in 1800 and which provides the context for her vision. Her opening lines are heavy with a sense of despair and weariness in contemplating an 'Enlightened' Europe which had been engaged in bloody revolution or avaricious wars for the greater part of the previous two decades: 'Still the loud death drum, thundering from afar,/O'er the vext nations pours the storm of war' (1). Again 'Freedom' (8) is figured as a female figure: 'Prostrate she lies beneath the Despot's sway' (9). The 'Despot' and the 'Colossal Power' (7) obviously refers specifically here to Napoleon but the language used, the 'overwhelming force/Bear[ing] down each fort of Freedom in its course' (7), has echoes of 'Corsica' and thus functions also as a more general reference to political tyranny. The imagery has a strong gender commentary underpinning it as Freedom, like Peace, is crushed by an 'overwhelming' tyrannical male power in a description which is suggestive of rape. The 'hushed nations' resemble the Shepherd in 'Peace and Shepherd' as they 'curse' the 'Despot' but ultimately 'obey' (10). Barbauld uses the eighteenth century linguistic and cultural convention of equating 'man' with 'human' to her own advantage and 'woman' is silently excluded from the warfare and

the carnage. Thus 'Glad Nature' (12), a female abstraction is set against 'frantic man' who 'calls to Famine' (15), 'Disease', and 'Rapine' (16).

Barbauld voices what had with the two exceptions of the years 1798 and 1803-5 been the Liberal stance on the European war, and which the *NBLM* suggests was increasingly becoming the view of the silenced women citizens hearing the slaughter of war celebrated in the Tory press. Again Barbauld turns from the abstract language of glory to the real effects of war, laying bare its horrors - the least of which she tells us is 'the ensanguined field' (22) - but here turns to the suffering which war engenders for women. She describes the famine which ensues as crops are plundered by soldiers and the women deprived of husbands and sons. The latter consequence of war also becomes another means of denying women's sexuality since in the absence of men for husbands, 'the rose withers on its virgin thorns' (30). For women the territories of war are representational not physical but they are no less real. The geographical landscape which their husbands and sons fight on is traced on a map within the women's private domestic spheres: an 'anxious eye explores,/Its dotted boundaries and penciled shores' (35), suggesting women's frustration at being restricted to their domestic spheres and at their political powerlessness. The anguishes of war are then doubly experienced: in an immediate way and in the minds and imaginations of women. To put this another way Barbauld suggests that the effects of the political are encountered both in the public sphere and then again in the private, so that the boundaries of the two spheres are perpetually transgressed. Placed as they are in the first section of the poem these images seem to work towards a justification of Barbauld's involving herself in politics, they suggest that women have a right to comment and have an opinion on political issues since these have a direct effect on their lives.

Having subtly registered this claim Barbauld goes on in the second section of the poem to address Britain's own role in the political and economic agendas which have contributed to the present situation in Europe. It begins with a warning addressed specifically to imperialistic Britain in which the tone of the poem begins to change from observation to prophecy:

And think'st thou, Britain, still to sit at ease,
An island Queen amidst thy subject seas,
....
To sport in wars, while danger keeps aloof,
Thy grassy turf unbruised by hostile hoof?
So sing thy flatterers; but, Britain, know,
Thou who has shared the guilt must share the woe. (39)

Nature imagery is evoked to imagine this 'Ruin' which through the gendering of the natural carries the implication of a feminised vengeance; the vision is certainly apocalyptic, as 'Ruin' comes like 'an earthquake shock' (49). Britain's fall, Barbauld suggests, is a consequence of the corruption of an economic base that is built upon 'baseless wealth' which 'dissolves in air away' (53), and in her later vision of London in ruins, she comments that 'the state which commerce brings' is that 'Merchants/Send forth their mandates to dependent kings' (163), in an early capitalist critique. This criticism of Britain's economic basis was a recurrent theme of poetry from the last quarter of the eighteenth century onwards. Cowper's *The Task* is one of the key examples and that poem incorporates a similar, though less completely imagined prophecy of Britain's fate:

Where has commerce such a mart,
So rich, so throng'd, so drain'd, and so supplied,
As London....
....
Our arch of empire, stedfast but for you,
A mutilated structure, soon to fall. (719; 773)¹⁶

Like Cowper, Barbauld suggests that commerce is built upon a self-defining opposition of 'Enfeebling Luxury and ghastly Want' (64) and as such is inherently corrupt, but for Barbauld by this date this economic corruption is connected to the exploiting and controlling agendas of the darker side of the European Enlightenment. Set against this are the contributions that an Enlightened Britain has made to world art and culture which she still continues to celebrate, suggesting that 'Thine' is 'the full harvest of the mental year' (76) and that 'arts that make it life to live are thine' (78). She even seems to predict the late twentieth century brain drain of British intellectuals, artists and academics to America: 'If westward streams the light that leaves thy shores,/Still from thy lamp the streaming radiance pours' (79). In imagining the influence of British philosophers, poets and playwrights upon

the rest of the world Barbauld formulates an interesting alternative vision of future canons of literature, ranking the now relatively obscure James Thomson with Milton and Joanna Baillie alongside Shakespeare. Barbauld also makes reference to two plays by Baillie, thus extending her mention well beyond that of Shakespeare, a fact which did not go unnoticed by her male contemporaries.¹⁷

The third section contains some of the poem's most lingering images. It is a description of this future moment imagined through the power of 'Fancy' (113), which functions here as elsewhere in Barbauld's poems as a strategy of movement that allows her to escape from the present. 'Fancy' is described as 'wander[ing]...down the lapse of years/Shedding o'er imaged woes untimely tears' (113), a figuring which suggests that Barbauld in fact tried to preclude reviewers' criticisms by replacing the omniscient Old Testament prophetic model with a more acceptable feminised version. Despite this feminisation of the prophetic persona Barbauld's vision of the future is omniscient and apocalyptic, as she looks to a dystopian moment to be when Britain lies in ruins like Rome and Greece, and is visited by American tourists. In formulating this vision Barbauld responds to the tide of visionary and generally nationalistic epics which, as Stuart Curran notes in his *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, swept through the early years of the nineteenth century and which in their turn were strongly influenced by Volney's *Ruins of Empire* (1789).¹⁸ In Barbauld's poem she rewrites key male poetic visions of Britain's future, however, including ones by Pope and Thomson as well as those put forward by her contemporaries. Her poem seems to be particularly engaged with a re-working Thomson's poem, *Liberty* (1733-4), in which the Goddess of Liberty attended by arts and science is figured as moving from Italy and Greece to Britain, which 'shines supreme,/The land of light' (IV, 523).¹⁹ Barbauld takes the logic of Thomson's argument one stage further to a time when that light has moved on again and Britain itself lies in ruins. Barbauld's poem also challenges the futuristic vision of Britain put forward by the young radical Percy Bysshe Shelley in his epic *Queen Mab* (1813), a poem which he began work on in 1811 and which thus responds to the same political moment as *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*. A similar omniscience of vision is adopted by both poets as they survey the past, examine the tyrannies of the present and look to the future. Shelley's poem however, although revolutionary rather than

patriotic, shares with Thomson and the other male writers of visionary epics, a vision of Britain's future which is Utopian and optimistic, in which 'Through the wide rent in Time's eternal veil/Hope was seen beaming' (VIII, 12).²⁰ These imaginative Utopian visions of Britain's future stand in stark comparison to Barbauld's dark dystopia in which she despairingly surveys the pattern of empires and the corruption of Britain's economic basis, and refuses to shy away from the logic of this paradigm, figuring Britain not in terms of nationalistic glory or revolutionary idealism but in ruins.

In the reviews of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* it is clear that it was this part of the poem which caused the most unease and which profoundly disturbed contemporary critics, no doubt because it does not merely hint at the decline of the British empire but actually takes us on an imaginative tour of the country's wreckage. This section reads like a Baedeker's guide to a Britain returned to a state of pre-Enlightenment Gothic ruins, when 'Night, Gothic night' again shades 'the plains/Where power is seated, and where Science reigns' (121). This image of the country as the seat of power connects Britain to the masculine and 'Colossal power' (7) of Napoleon and at some level the poem suggests that Britain is responsible for her own downfall, she has 'shared the guilt' (46) and thus her lying in ruins is all the more bitter: 'Time' has torn 'the garland from her brow' (125). Barbauld depicts a future which was deemed 'unpatriotic' by her contemporary Tory critics and which no doubt touched the nerves of many Tory fears, in which an American youth 'From the Blue Mountains, or Ontario's lake' (130) visits various tourist sites where once British 'statesmen, sages, poets, heroes trod' (132). Croker highlights the alarm which this passage caused in his response to these lines; he describes a vision of an 'England' which 'is undone....while America is to go on increasing and improving in arts, in arms, and even....in virtue' (Croker, p. 310).

What also riled contemporary reviewers was the alternative history of England that Barbauld posits; that alongside statues of Newton these tourists are to visit 'some peasant's homely shed' (Croker, p. 139). The *Quarterly* waxes most satirical when it draws attention to the fact that in Babauld's version the innovative farming methods of the dissenter William Roscoe go down in posterity, while traditional symbols of

Britain's greatness are laid waste and all but forgotten: 'Oxford and Cambridge in ruins! London a desert, and the Thames a sedgy brook! While Mr. Roscoe's barns and piggeries are in excellent repair and objects not only of curiosity but even of reverence and enthusiasm' (Croker, pp. 311-2). Croker, the voice of the Tory establishment, makes clear that his version of history would condemn Mr. Roscoe and his experimental farming methods to obscurity along with Barbauld. Both of these figures belong to the margins and not to the mainstream by which Croker and his fellow Tories would have Britain's culture remembered and defined. Barbauld takes the opportunity of looking to the future in this poem to construct her own version of history and she is selective in her vision: an effigy of John Howard will be a site of pilgrimage at whose 'sainted feet' (186) prayers are offered; it is the memory of the Whig politician Fox not the Tory Prime Minister Pitt, speaking in parliament which is recalled by visiting the House of Commons; it is her friend 'gallant Moore' (197) who symbolises British soldierly heroism rather than Wellington, the establishment's hero of the hour, and 'Priestley' injured name' (203) is to join that of Benjamin Franklin in the annals of science.²¹ Barbauld is writing her own account of history here to set against the established version from which these names, along with hers, would be omitted. Hers is a Liberal, dissenting version of history written from the margins and made up of those of her own political persuasion and in most instances her personal friends. Her vision of the future in this poem is the realisation of the 'future moment' which she repeatedly turns to in her political poems of the 1790s, in which history acknowledges the value of the Liberal dissenting Enlightenment. This future moment is strangely distorted and embittered however, since Barbauld suggests that Britain is now too corrupt to recognise its significance and the gifts of knowledge and art pass beyond her shores.

A clue as to why Barbauld is forced to imagine this future Enlightened moment away from Britain is contained within these images of the country's ruins. Along with the statues of key dissenting figures the tourist's 'eyes shall gaze' also 'On spoils from every clime' (209), on 'Egyptian granites and the Etruscan vase' (210). These relics function not only as reminders of earlier civilisations gone before but as symbols of Britain's own corruption. They are mementoes of the imperialistic, acquisitive, and avaricious economic base upon which Britain has laid its foundations

and because of which it is doomed to fall. These images of corruption lead us in to the final section of the poem, that which scans the decline and fall of empires and contains the prophecy for the next great empire of the world. It is this final part of the poem, specifically Barbauld's strategy of using an imaginary personification - alternatively termed a 'Spirit' (215) and a 'Genius' (241) - which travels around the world bestowing a civilising influence, that caused the most confusion both among Barbauld's contemporaries and more recent critics. Nearly all contemporary critics commented unfavourably on this aspect of the poem and some hazarded disparate guesses at what the 'Spirit' might personify. The *Anti-Jacobin* commented sardonically that

On this passage, we shall only remark, that if *obscurity be clearness*, Mrs. B. has been most happy in her delineation of the 'spirit,'....As nearly as we can guess - for we cannot speak with certainty - this said *moody* and *viewless* spirit is *liberty*. (*Anti-Jacobin Review*, p. 208)

The Quarterly Review describes the figure as 'a mysterious Spirit or Genius....but who or what he is, or whence he comes, does not very clearly appear' (Croker, p. 312). Even the *NBLM* expressed concern about this figure:

We cannot help wishing that the poet had been more explanatory in this part of the work, and had entered into a fuller description of the power to whose presence and absence such effects are assigned as the growth and decay of nations and empires. It is doubtless, some principle personated, analogous to Truth and Virtue, which includes liberty and knowledge. (*NBLM*, p. 321)

One of the most recent critics of the poem, William Keach, also finds this section a weakness and writes that the ambiguity of Barbauld's description 'needlessly mystifies the historical shifts in cultural power and authority' (Keach, p. 574).

Firstly I want to formulate a reading of this Spirit as a personification of the Enlightenment, an interpretation which would encompass many of the suggestions put forward by her contemporaries such as 'liberty' and 'knowledge'. This reading is suggested by the imagery through which Barbauld depicts the Spirit's presence, which is figured primarily in terms of a light either being cast upon or removed from countries. Thus as the Genius moves away from the ancient civilisations of Egypt

and Rome he throws his ‘animating ray’ (261) Northward and ‘O’er Celtic nations bursts the mental day’ (262). The spirit’s movement is figured as a light sweeping over the world and leaving darkness behind; as he leaves Britain the country returns to a state of pre-Enlightenment darkness when ‘Night, Gothic night’ (121) once more takes over. In such a reading the mysteriousness of this spirit can be connected to Barbauld’s continuing uncertainty about the Enlightenment project and indeed the Spirit’s shifting of the light is figured as ‘capricious’, and he is likened to a ‘playful child’ (263), suggesting doubt as to the integrity of what he represents. Elsewhere in her poetry Barbauld is extremely precise in her use of abstraction and personification, even down to their gender significance, which would suggest that the ambiguity here is a deliberate strategy of evasion. She describes the personification in what can only be seen as intentionally mysterious terms, as ‘Secret’, his birth ‘unknown’ (216) and as ‘Moody and viewless as the changing wind’ (217).

The imagery which describes the effects engendered by the Spirit’s presence confirms the idea that he represents the Enlightenment project. Like the images of progress found in her early poetry, this is riven with contradictory meaning; he is identified initially with an ideal Enlightenment agenda:

Where’er he turns, the human brute awakes,
And, roused to better life, his sordid hut forsakes:
He thinks, he reasons, glows with purer fires,
Feels finer wants, and burns with new desires:
Obedient Nature follows where he leads;
The steaming marsh is changed to fruitful meads[.] (219)

As with the earlier representations of this project however, other imagery points to a negative, darker side. Nature is once again shown to be controlled and exploited, as ‘stricter bounds the cultured fields divide’ (234) and from the earth’s bed ‘is drawn the ponderous ore’ (227). From the increased wealth which Britain enjoys as a result of this exploitation and control, ‘Babel’s towers and terraced gardens rise,/And pointed obelisks invade the skies’ (229). These images are extremely problematic; the ‘terraced gardens’ represent a wealth which Barbauld elsewhere critiques as indicative of luxury and avarice, the tower of Babel is biblically a symbol of human

pride and subsequent fall, and the ‘obelisk’ is phallic and ‘invades’ the skies in what appears to be a raping or at least a colonising image. This colonising and exploitative agenda is made more explicit by the ‘Gems of the East’ which ‘adorn’ Britain’s ‘crown’ (307) and which are also gathered by the wealth that is a by-product of the Spirit’s presence.

Although Barbauld’s representation of the Enlightenment remains contradictory, the despairing tone of the poem and the gendering of the ‘Genius’ masculine, would suggest that the positive feminised ideal found in Barbauld’s early poems had been all but overcome by this darker exploitative agenda. There is too a fatalism about Barbauld’s imagery at the end of the poem which depicts a ‘worm’ in the ‘core’ of London’s Enlightenment success (314). The poem describes ‘Arts, arms and wealth’ as destroying the ‘fruits they bring’ (315), suggesting that the Enlightenment project as it became manifest in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, contains within itself the seeds of its own failure. As with the earlier tensions within her representations of this project, this vision does not translate simply as a male and a female Enlightenment agenda, since men such as Priestley and Howard remain located on the side of a positive feminised project. Both men and women are implicated in Barbauld’s vision of the corruption inherent in the European Enlightenment. The poem suggests that ‘Commerce, like beauty knows no second spring’ (315), and the correlation between these two gendered terms reminds us of the way in which ‘Beauty’ was involved in the project of slavery in *Epistle to William Wilberforce*. Both men and women are responsible for supporting a corrupt economy which is founded on oppression and inequality: ‘O’er want and woe thy gorgeous robe is spread’ (318).

Despite her growing conviction that the Enlightenment project is inherently flawed and corrupted, Barbauld refuses to completely disown the ideal version rooted in her early experiences at Warrington, and it is this legacy that she seeks to bestow on the New World in her prophetic vision at the end of the poem. The Spirit turns his light upon the shores of America and declares, ‘Thy world, Columbus, shall be free’ (334). Her vision of freedom here is doubly displaced, not only onto the future but onto the removed spatial territory of the ‘New World’, a land which was suggestive

of new beginnings and new hope. America had also of course been a place of refuge for Joseph Priestley after the burning of his home in Birmingham and his exile may well have been the moment which symbolised the beginnings of the 'brain drain' for Barbauld, in which scientists, philosophers and artists, all that for her represents the prospect of freedom within civilisation, leave Europe for a newly independent country. While Barbauld continues to imagine an ideal version of the Enlightenment project and attempts to project this ideal onto the shores of the New World, in the context of the poem this would seem to be an unhopeful vision. In the continued problematics of the imagery associated with the Enlightenment and the most determining gesture of the poem, the gendering the spirit of the Enlightenment masculine, Barbauld reminds us of women's continued exclusion from that project and suggests that the darker forces would once again prevail.

Eighteen Hundred and Eleven is a bleak view of the future from the perspective of a woman who had experienced the Enlightenment at its most progressive, but who had lived to see that progressiveness and liberalism crushed by a repressive, reactionary and aggressive male establishment, and a corrupt capitalist economic base. Barbauld suggests that the Enlightenment project itself, while functioning to dispel the darkness of ignorance and superstition, had engendered its own, perhaps even more insidious darkness, which denied basic human and civil rights to dissenters, women and slaves, and which deployed the wealth created by scientific and technological developments to exploit, colonise and oppress other peoples. The ideals of liberty, toleration and liberal understanding which she assimilated from Warrington as a young girl remain here the central tenets of her politics, but the European Enlightenment is no longer figured as the harbinger of these values. Her prophecy in the poem is historically specific, commenting more on international power structures at this time than on a future moment. She herself seems to have been aware of this, titling the poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, the year in which it was composed rather than a future date. In terms of its predictions however, it is not as far from the truth as those Tory reviewers would have liked to think. In the last century America has become one of the world superpowers whose cultural influence has spread over the globe. Most ironically of all, it is American academics who are at the vanguard of sifting through British Romantic culture, questioning

current canons and reviving Barbauld for future generations with a new collection of her poetry and a biography. Barbauld placed her trust in the right quarters in this respect at least.

'New Veins of Thought': The Death of a Princess

In the biographies of Barbauld written after her death it became commonplace to depict *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* as the last poem that she ever published. Anna Le Breton announces that '[t]his was the last time she appeared in print' (Le Breton p. 157) and Betsy Rodgers states that 'Mrs Barbauld was so mortified by the hostile reception of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* that for the rest of her life she published nothing more except for a short *Memoir* of Dr Estin' (Rodgers, p. 143). Recent critics have accepted this idea and continue to make the same claim, depicting the poem as not only the symbolic but the literal finale to Barbauld's career. William Keach takes this as the central idea in his essay 'A Regency Prophecy and the end of Anna Barbauld's Career', in which he states that Barbauld 'took Croker's advice and went him one better: she not only wrote no more of what he calls "satire" and "party pamphlets in verse," she wrote no more for publication at all'; Keach adds that a 'prolific and influential literary career came to an end with Croker's croakings' (Keach, pp. 571-2). This line of argument is in fact based on a misconception. Although Barbauld was strongly affected by the *Quarterly's* review and published very little for the remaining thirteen years of her life, describing in 1813 her 'pen' as 'idle' (Aikin, p. 95) and admitting that 'no new veins of thought are opened' (Aikin, p. 129), she was not completely silenced by Croker. In fact between the publication of that poem and her death in 1825 she continued to write verse privately and published a handful of these poems.²²

I want to conclude my readings of Barbauld's political poetry not with *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* but with 'On the Death of the Princess Charlotte', which is not the last poem she ever wrote or indeed the last poem she ever published, but it is her last published political poem. It demonstrates that Barbauld's politics had not been toned down or veiled since Croker's verbal assault, and are if anything even more overt. The poem is written on the occasion of the death of Charlotte Augusta, the daughter of the Prince Regent on November 6 1817 and was published

in the *Annual Register* of 1818. The Princess's death at the age of twenty one in childbirth, excited a set of responses which are particularly fascinating in the wake of the scenes witnessed recently in this country following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The event in 1817 seemed to generate a parallel explosion of national mourning. The *Monthly Repository* noted that '[s]pontaneously the streets of every city, town and village exhibited the outward signs of inward distress' and that '[u]niversally the sable garbs of mourning were worn'.²³ On the day of the funeral churches 'were attended with crowded audiences, and every where sermons adapted to the occasion were preached' while all 'work was at a stand, and the minds of every one were filled with the loss they had sustained' (*Monthly Repository*, p. 693). Barbauld's friend Maria Edgeworth recorded in a letter the sensations felt on this occasion which resonate so uncannily with our own recent experiences, that 'every human Creature seems to feel' the Princess's death 'as if it were a *private* misfortune' (cited in *Poems*, p. 323).

A number of poems were written on this occasion which register the shock at the event as well as the national outpouring of grief. Barbauld's opens in this fairly conventional way:

Yes Britain mourns, as with electric shock
For youth, for love, for happiness destroyed.
Her universal population wells
In grief spontaneous[.] (1)

Unlike a poem of the same name written by Felicia Hemans, however, which retains this tone throughout, Barbauld instead uses the occasion to formulate an attack on the Prince Regent. One explanation for the tremendous outpouring of grief is that Charlotte had been disliked by her father the Regent, and he in turn had been incredibly unpopular with the British people. Charlotte seemed to offer hope for the future of Britain in the prospect of replacing a line of unpopular male rulers with a much loved Queen. Again uncannily echoing the Princess of Wales, Princess Charlotte was seen in contrast to a repressive, out of touch Regency. No sense of this emerges in Hemans' poem however which focuses on Charlotte herself, both in idealised symbolic terms as a 'morning star' (19) and 'England's....Flower' (10), but also in terms of her regal lineage:

And she is gone! - the royal and the young!
In soul commanding, and in heart benign;
Who, from a race of kings and heroes sprung,
Glowed with a spirit lofty as her line. (21)²⁴

In sharp contrast Barbauld uses the event not to celebrate the monarchy but to formulate a bitter attack on the Prince Regent, the one 'Who midst this general burst of grief remains/In strange tranquillity' (10). In comparison with the love that the people felt for the Princess is set his coldness and contempt, which even the sight of his daughter's hearse passing beneath his window cannot 'move to mingle with this flood one tear' (17). Barbauld speculates how the Regent spends the day of her funeral, whether 'In careless apathy' or 'perhaps in mirth' (18), with the implication that a man who cannot feel for his own daughter is even less fit to care for and rule a nation. The poem sets the Regent apart from his people not in terms of his regality but his inhumanity; 'Like a scathed oak amidst the forest trees' (26) 'He holds no sympathy with living nature' (29) and he functions as a further emblem of the corrupt and dying centre of the British body politic.

The concentrated imagery of the poem and the bitterness of tone are echoed by Shelley in his sonnet 'England in 1819', written less than two years later, in which he also attacks the Regent's inability to relate to human suffering:

Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn - mud from a muddy spring, -
Rulers, who neither see, nor feel, nor know[.]
(*Works of P. B. Shelley*, 2)

Although more openly abusive, Shelley echoes the controlled contempt expressed by Barbauld in her poem, which is less an elegy on the dead princess than a political diatribe against 'him who does not weep' (35). This comparison serves to remind us not only that Barbauld spanned several literary generations and exceeds our current literary categories of Augustan poetics, and first and second generation Romantics, but that unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, she retained her radicalism into old age. This poem, perhaps more than any other makes evident what we had until recently lost in relegating Barbauld's poetry to obscurity and silence: a politically committed

writer, who in the face of personal abuse, a reactionary establishment, and the criticism of friends, continued to make her unpopular and often radical politics heard through her poetry.

Notes

¹ *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by Lucy Aikin, 2 vols (London: Longman and others, 1825), II, p. 122 (*sic*).

² J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 163.

³ Quotation taken from *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994). All subsequent quotations from Barbauld's poetry are taken from this edition and first line numbers only given in parenthesis in the text.

⁴ See McCarthy and Kraft's notes to this poem in *Poems*, p. 302.

⁵ Lucy Aikin, 'Memoir', in *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by Lucy Aikin, 2 vols (London: Longman and others, 1825), II, pp. v-lxxii (pp. lii-liii).

⁶ *Henry Crabb Robinson: On Books and Their Writers*, ed. by Edith J. Morley, 3 vols (London: Dent, 1938), I, p. 64.

⁷ William Keach, 'A Regency Prophecy and the End of Anna Barbauld's Career', *Studies in Romanticism*, 33:4 (Winter 1994), 569-77 (pp. 571-2); Duncan Wu, 'Introduction', in *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. xix-xxviii (p. xxiii).

⁸ [John Wilson Croker], 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven. A Poem. By Anna Letitia Barbauld', *The Quarterly Review*, 7 (June 1812), 309-13 (p. 309).

⁹ 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven. A Poem. By Anna Lætitia Barbauld', *Universal Magazine*, 7 (1812), 217-8 (p. 217).

¹⁰ Betsy Rodgers, *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs. Barbauld and her Family* (London: Methuen, 1958), p. 142.

¹¹ Cited in Anna Letitia Le Breton, *Memoir of Mrs. Barbauld, Including Letters and Notices of Her Family and Friends* (London: Bell, 1874), p. 157.

¹² Jerom Murch, *Mrs. Barbauld and Her Contemporaries: Sketches of Some Eminent Literary and Scientific Englishwomen* (London: Longman and others, 1877), p. 82 and p. 83.

¹³ See McCarthy and Kraft's notes to the poem in *Poems*, p. 310.

¹⁴ 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven; a poem. By Anna Lætitia Barbauld', *New British Lady's Magazine*, 2 (1815), 318-21 (p. 319).

¹⁵ The full text of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* is included in *Romantic Women Poets*, ed. by Duncan Wu.

¹⁶ *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. by H. S. Milford, 4th edn. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

¹⁷ Henry Crabb Robinson noted that 'She has a strange assortment of names - Shakespeare and the loved Joanna. But Miss Baillie has eight lines, while Shakespeare has only a couplet' (*On Books*, p. 64).

¹⁸ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Chapter Seven.

¹⁹ *The Poetical Works of James Thomson* (London and Edinburgh: Nimmo, 1878).

²⁰ *The Works of P. B. Shelley* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994).

²¹ Andrew Ashfield in his notes to this poem mistakenly identifies 'Howard' as 'Henry Howard Earl of Surrey' (Andrew Ashfield in *Romantic Women Poets 1770-1838: An Anthology*, ed. by Andrew Ashfield [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995], p. 298, n. 22). 'Howard' is identified as John Howard by both McCarthy and Kraft and Duncan Wu, who point out that the effigy of 'Howard' in the poem is met with immediately after that of 'Johnson' and that marble statues of these two figures stand in the knave of St Paul's Cathedral (See McCarthy and Kraft's notes to *Eighteen Hundred Eleven*, in *Poems*, p. 315, and Duncan Wu's notes to the poem in *Romantic Women Poets*, p. 14).

²² In McCarthy and Kraft's edition of Barbauld's poetry, the poems are arranged in chronological order and 22 poems follow *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*. Most of these were either not published until 1825 in Aikin's *Works* or remained in manuscript form, written in letters to friends. Five of these number were however published in Barbauld's lifetime: 'On the Death of the Princess Charlotte' was published in the *Annual Register* of 1818 and signed 'Mrs. B_____d'; 'A Thought on Death' was published without Barbauld's permission first in an American magazine, *The Christian Disciple* in November/December 1821 and then in the *Monthly Repository* in October 1822, Barbauld then sent in a corrected version which was published in the *Monthly Repository* in November 1822; Two poems, 'Lines Written at the Close of the Year' and 'To the New Year, 1823', were published in the *Monthly Repository* in January 1823 and signed 'Anna'; and 'To Mrs. _____, on Returning a fine Hyacinth Plant' was published under Barbauld's full name in a collection of poems edited by Joanna Baillie entitled *A Collection of Poems, Chiefly Manuscript, and from Living Authors* (London: Longman and others, 1823). See McCarthy and Kraft's notes to individual poems in *Poems*.

²³ 'Monthly Retrospect of Public Affairs', *Monthly Repository*, 12 (1817), 693-4 (p. 693).

²⁴ *The Poetical Works of Mrs. Hemans* (London and New York: Warne, 1887).

CHARLOTTE SMITH

A Private and a Public Sorrow

Overview

As a close contemporary of Anna Barbauld's, Charlotte Smith also belongs to the no-[wo]man's land of literary history; Florence Hiblish, Smith's biographer, when trying to locate Smith's poetry for readers comes across a literary vacuum in which she leaves Smith suspended: '[t]he traditional classical form of poetry had passed, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) had not been conceived when Charlotte Smith set out in 1784 upon her first literary venture. It is to this transitional literary period...that Charlotte Smith belongs'.¹ Recent critics, although offering a more sophisticated understanding of eighteenth century poetics, still struggle to situate Smith's work in terms of established literary categories. Critical opinion is divided between those who seek to position Smith's poetry in relation to sensibility and those who attempt to locate it within Romanticism. Janet Todd in her study of sensibility places Smith unproblematically in the same tradition as Collins, Chatterton, Warton and Gray, identifying her as an imitator of that 'supreme exponent of sensibility as suicide', Werther, engaged in a project of 'versifyi[ng] his melancholia'.² In the opposite school Stuart Curran is the most persistent exemplar, most recently describing Smith as 'the first poet in England whom in retrospect we would call Romantic'.³

Both of these critical enterprises are extremely problematic. In relation to sensibility and melancholy, its key poetic discourse, there are crucial differences between Smith's use of melancholic convention and that of her contemporaries which sets her apart from that tradition; as I will show in Chapter Six, for Smith melancholy is not an artificial aesthetic stance but an almost permanent state of mind engendered by a miserable life. With regard to Romanticism, while Smith did much to inspire the young male poets Wordsworth and Coleridge in terms of the centrality of place given to nature and memory, and her experimentation with the sonnet form and

blank verse meditation, she precedes and informs that movement rather than belongs within it. I want to suggest that for the purposes of critical analysis, rather than struggling to fit Smith's poetry within either of these two literary categories - which are, after all, constructed and defined through poetry written by men - it is more revealing to perceive her poetics as one woman's response to the cultural, social and political period through which she lived, and to examine how she formulates a poetics that allows her to situate her own plight within the broader issues of contemporary politics. I want to suggest that Smith more than any other female poet writing at this time gives voice to the psychic condition of women living under the social, legal, familial and ideological oppressions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

As with Barbauld, Smith's early poetry exhibits a less overt politicised awareness than her later works, which would suggest that the 1790s as an epoch were crucial in raising levels of women's political involvement, but again this earlier poetry can be unpicked for a political subtext. Smith's early poetic output is also distinguished from her later work by the almost exclusive use of the sonnet form which dominates her poetry until the 1790s, from which time she grows increasingly experimental, using a wider range of poetic forms and writing her two most lengthy and significant pieces in blank verse. In recent critical analysis it is Smith's sonnets which are generally positioned in the tradition of melancholic poetics and her longer blank verse poems which are perceived as forerunners of Wordsworthian Romanticism. As my readings of her poems will show however, Smith's sonnets exceed the artificiality of the cult of sensibility in their attempt to record genuine suffering and while her other poems, in particular those longer blank verse pieces *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head*, do inform the later male Romantic poetics they also stand apart from the Romantic movement, inscribing a vision of personal suffering from a female perspective and articulating a Wollstonecraftian vision of oppression.

In terms of Smith's politics however, her use of different forms is revealing. While many of the same themes recur in both Smith's sonnets and other poems, the structure of the sonnet form, with its rigid confines and its eighteenth century connections with the poetry of personal melancholy, allows for a different kind of

political discourse to blank verse with its more open structure and relative freedom of expression. Through the compressed sonnet form Smith exhibits the interior damage performed on women during a life of social, physical, legal and ideological oppression. In her longer poems she addresses more directly key political issues such as the French Revolution, political exile, poverty, and slavery, but these also contain a subtext of female suffering which insistently renders the political personal. In order to understand the logic of Smith's political poetics my readings will follow the trajectory of her own development and since Smith responds to the same set of historical circumstances as Barbauld, following this trajectory also reveals important parallels and differences between the two women. Chapter Six will examine Smith's sonnets and the politics of the issues these raise, such as the sonnet debate of the 1780s and the attempt to register protest through a record of female despair. Chapter Seven turns to the political poems which Smith produced during the 1790s when she, like Barbauld, was drawn to an increasingly radical agenda; as well as looking at her lengthy blank verse poem *The Emigrants*, this chapter will examine a number of other poems produced at this time which address a range of social problems within the context of the personal and about which very little has been written. Chapter Eight examines the global and historical political outlook of Smith's final poems which culminate in her unfinished lengthy blank verse poem *Beachy Head*, looking in particular at her use of history and botany as a means of expressing a radical politics within this larger geographical and temporal frame.

The constant interweaving of the personal and the political which I have proposed as a defining feature of Smith's poetics leads me to the question of autobiography, a mode of writing which has engaged recent feminist critics and which I want to suggest has a political significance that is relevant here. Linda Anderson writes that through autobiography women 'transgress the codes of what it is acceptable to reveal in order to explore those previously silent, unrecorded areas of experience' and though Anderson is referring to more traditional modes of autobiography such as the journal, other critics have pointed to the need - while not unproblematic - to read women's fictions in these transgressive, autobiographical terms.⁴ Mitzi Myers for example, in an essay on Mary Wollstonecraft, notes that whereas men frequently write straightforward self-admitted autobiographies 'fewer women write

autobiography undisguised' and that 'women's discoveries of self take a more circuitous route; their self-representations wear camouflage'.⁵ Myers goes on to argue that this is especially 'true of eighteenth-century writings, in which the autobiographical impulse is often deflected into other forms: novels of education, children's books, expository manuals of instruction and advice' (Myers, p. 193). Smith takes this impulse further than any other woman writer of the period, constantly inscribing herself and her sufferings into her novels and even into her poetry. In doing so she, like Wollstonecraft, performs a double act of transgression, not merely revealing what should remain hidden in private writing, but laying her private life bare in published work. Smith compounds her crime by making sure that her novels and poetry were read in this way through her prefaces, which left her contemporaries in no doubt that the fictions were semi-autobiographical and which rendered her open to a great deal of criticism for her repeated violations of the codes of discretion.⁶

The autobiographical impulse in Smith's novels has been widely noted by critics and is so marked that it is a virtually inescapable aspect of her fiction. In her poetry this impulse is still crucially present but problematised by the nature of poetic discourse with its loaded imagery and concentrated metaphorical language. Here the autobiographical does not merely inform but repeatedly disrupts the text. In the sonnets, with their tight compressed form, this disruption functions as a pressure which threatens to break out of its formal containment and in her longer blank verse pieces, as a circuitousness or labyrinthine logic which disrupts any notion of linear progression. Cixous writes that women's 'discourse, even when "theoretical" or political, is never simple or linear or "objectivized," universalized; she involves her story in history'.⁷ This offers us a useful theory for understanding the complexities of Smith's political poetry as she inscribes her own experience into a wider discussion of history and politics. In my reading of Smith's poetry I draw attention to the ways in which her political poems are repeatedly unsettled by the personal and suggest how this disruption can be read as a political act. For Smith, the boundaries of public and private are not merely transgressed, but somehow conflated, and with the horrors of her lived experience as a woman in the eighteenth century blurring with a broader political commentary, there is always a gender politics at the heart of

her poems. It is with an awareness of this that we should read her poetry, and in order to be more critically aware of this aspect of her writing, we must turn first to some biographical detail.

Biography

Charlotte Smith was born Charlotte Turner on May 4 1749, the eldest daughter of Nicholas Turner, a wealthy landowner, and his wife Anna Towers, of whom little is known. Her formative years are viewed by biographers as happy and indeed a number of poems hark back to the Sussex landscape of her youth as emblematic of unequalled happiness before sorrow and despair set in. Despite the blissful picture projected by Smith in memory, and the acceptance by later biographers of this vision of idyllic childhood, her early years were in fact marred by tragedy. Her mother died giving birth to Charlotte's brother when the girl was only three, and on his wife's death her father left the family estate to travel abroad, leaving his daughter in the care of an aunt. This abandonment by her father at an early age, and the loss of her mother, engendered a sense of exile in Smith which she carried with her throughout her life, and which she translates into her poetry through recurring images of political and social exiles, and solitary outcast figures.

At the age of six Charlotte was sent to school to receive the standard eighteenth century education for girls, but this education, such as it was - even the *Monthly Magazine* described it in 1807 as 'the attainment of superficial accomplishments' - was soon ended and at the age of twelve she was introduced into society.⁸ By fourteen she had received proposals of marriage which were 'rejected on the account of her extreme youth', but less than a year later in 1764 when Mr. Turner decided on a second marriage, a rash decision was made to marry Charlotte off quickly.⁹ On February 23 1765, when Charlotte was fifteen, she was married to twenty-one year old Benjamin Smith, son of the Director of the East India Company and a partner in his father's business. Smith's sister, Catherine Dorset, attributes this hasty marriage to the fact that a new step-mother would have had problems dealing with a rebellious teenage girl, who 'having hitherto been indulged in every wish, and even every caprice, was ill prepared to submit to the control of a mother-in-law' (Dorset,

p. 306). Smith's own interpretation of this ill-fated event however, tells a somewhat different story:

....my father & my Aunt (peace to their ashes!) thought it a prodigious stroke of domestic policy, to sell me like a Southdown sheep, to the West India shambles....(& they would have done me a greater kindness if they had shot me at once). (cited in Todd and Blank, p. xi)

Smith sees the move to marry her off more perceptively as motivated by predominantly economic forces and in this letter, written towards the end of her unhappy life, acknowledges her status to be that of a commodity:

In the first months of her married life which she later, using the imagery evoked by Wollstonecraft to figure eighteenth century women's condition under patriarchy, described as 'worse than African bondage' (cited in Todd and Blank, p. xi), Smith was removed from the family home in Sussex and her new life established in London. There she lived 'in one of the narrowest and dirtiest lanes of the city' (Dorset, p. 307), in what Hiblish describes as 'a second-story flat in cheapside' (Hiblish, p. 33). The agony of this removal and the stark contrast it made with her former home, scarred Smith for the rest of her life and in her final unfinished poem, *Beachy Head*, the pain of these early days of enforced marriage appears not to have diminished:

And childhood scarcely passed, I was condemned,
A guiltless exile, silently to sigh,
While Memory, with faithful pencil, drew
The contrast; and regretting, I compar'd
With the polluted smoky atmosphere
And dark and stifling streets, the southern hills
That to the setting Sun, their graceful heads
Rearing, o'erlook the frith, where Vecta breaks
With her white rocks, the strong impetuous tide,
When western winds the vast Atlantic surge
To thunder on the coast[.] (287)¹⁰

In this dingy town-house Smith was left to take care of her husband's ailing and elderly step mother, who disliked her new daughter-in-law because of her ignorance of the practicalities of domestic economy. Smith soon fell pregnant however, and

gave birth to a son a year after her marriage. One year later, as Smith was preparing to give birth to a second child, this first baby died of a 'malignant and infectious disease' (Dorset, p. 310) which threatened the entire household. Seeing the toll that this had taken on her health, Smith's father-in-law bought her a home in more rural environs outside London and while this removal from the city did her a great deal of good physically, probably saving her life, the relative freedom to think which she found she now had, gave her opportunity to reflect on the appalling prospects of the life that stretched out before her. She describes in a letter of this period the sense of intellectual and mental exile that oppressed and almost overwhelmed her:

No disadvantage....could equal those I sustained; the more my mind expanded, the more I became sensible of personal slavery; the more I improved and cultivated my understanding, the farther I was removed from those with whom I was condemned to pass my life; and the more clearly I saw by these newly-acquired lights the horror of the abyss into which I had unconsciously plunged. (cited in Dorset, p. 311)

Janet Todd notes that 'there is much snobbishness in the distaste for commerce in the novels of Charlotte Smith' and a similar class-based sense of superiority seems to be expressed here.¹¹ Nevertheless Smith had ample reason for viewing with horror the life to which she had been 'condemned' even at this early stage and subsequent events would only confirm her apprehensions.

The 'abyss' of her married life continued in a downward spiral and these years were spent in an almost continual cycle of pregnancy, confinement, labour and nursing. Benjamin Smith was sliding towards financial ruin as he gambled and squandered both of their inheritances and proved a useless partner in his father's business. In 1776, when Smith was twenty-seven and had born eight children and buried one, her father-in-law died, leaving behind him an unfathomable will which no two lawyers could agree on and from which Smith would spend the rest of her life trying to wrest her children's inheritance. In 1783 after running up debts and through mismanagement greatly diminishing his father's trust, of which he was executor, Benjamin Smith was imprisoned for seven months, a sentence which his wife for the most part shared with him, writing on his release of the 'scenes of misery, of vice and even of terror' witnessed there:

Two attempts had, since my last residence among them, been made by the prisoners to procure their liberation, by blowing up the walls of the house. Throughout the night appointed for this enterprise, I remained dressed, watching at the window, and expecting every moment to witness contention and bloodshed, or perhaps be overwhelmed by the projected explosion. After such scenes and such apprehensions, how deliciously soothing to my wearied spirits was the soft pure air of the summer's morning, breathing over the dewy grass, as....we passed over the heaths of Surrey! (cited in Dorset, p. 315)

It was during this period of imprisonment and under the compelling need of finding a means of supporting herself and her family, that Smith set about publishing a volume of the poems which she had written over the years as a means of personal comfort. The preface to a later edition emphasises that these 'notes' of the 'melancholy lyre' were 'never intended for the public ear' (*Poems*, p. 5), but due to the pressing financial necessity she found herself living under, this private sorrow was presented to the public and on May 10 1784 the first edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* was published, under the patronage of William Hayley to whom she had applied for assistance and advice.

Although the success of this publication eased financial pressures it did not solve them and her husband, still pressed for money, was forced to retreat to France taking Smith and their children with him. There she arrived in October of 1784 at a cold and dilapidated chateau near Normandy where she gave birth to her twelfth and final child. Now acutely aware that her family's welfare would depend on her literary exertions, she busied herself translating a French novel, *Manon L'Escaut*, an undertaking for which she was, according to Hiblish, 'censured' when the translation appeared in England, where the novel was viewed as 'immoral' (Hiblish, p. 118). The family returned to England in the spring of 1785 and a year later another child died, leaving her with nine children still living - five sons and four daughters - and three sons dead. At about this time, after twenty-three years of miserable married life, Smith took the radical step of separating from her husband. This action, in a country where marital separations were legally and socially condemned, is attributed delicately by her sister to an 'increasing incompatibility of temper, which had rendered her union a source of misery for twenty-three years' (Dorset, p. 321).

Dorset also suggests that while Smith was 'liable to much unmerited censure' for the action, those who knew the private details 'could only regret that the measure had not been adopted years before' (*ibid.*) The *Monthly Magazine*'s memoir of Smith however, suggests a wider than familial knowledge of her private life when it alludes to 'circumstances which delicacy forbids us to detail' (*Monthly Magazine*, p. 247). This memoir also supports Dorset's opinion in describing the step as 'approved of by her friends' and which she was 'fully justified in taking in the opinions of those who knew the true motives which induced it' (*ibid.*).

The facts of the case are cagily avoided by her contemporaries and are not revealed by Hiblish, but they are laid out by Smith herself in both her private and public writings. In a letter written to the Reverend Joseph Walker concerning the circumstances of her separation, she describes crimes of adultery and physical violence which rendered it a matter of compelling urgency:

Tho infidelity and with the most despicable objects had rendered my continuing to live with him extremely wretched long before his debts compelled him to leave England, I could have been contented to have resided in the same house with him, had not his temper been so capricious and often so cruel that my life was not safe.¹²

Smith also managed to make public that which propriety demanded she keep private through her novels, in which time and again characters seem to reproduce the well known events of her own life and through which she found a vehicle to hint at the less well publicised facts. In Smith's first novel, *Emmeline* for example, written not long after she had left Benjamin Smith, she describes the plight of a female character who is married to an unfaithful and abusive husband. Themes of adultery, male violence and fecklessness, and women's oppression in marriage recur in a number of novels, allowing Smith to reveal covertly the grounds for her separation and the darker side of married life which society demanded remain concealed.

After the separation Smith's time was taken up in domestic concerns, caring for her nine children, but also in the public sphere where she pursued a literary career in order to provide for them and fought a constant legal battle to secure their inheritance. Most of her literary efforts at this time were expended on novel writing

which proved more financially lucrative than poetry, her first novel being published in 1788 and her last in 1798. Her prose most obviously but also as I will show her poetry, addresses a wide spectrum of political issues which become focused in the 1790s with the French Revolution. Smith's interest in and support of particular political causes is, however, almost invariably generated by personal experience; events such as being imprisoned for debt, her daughter marrying a French emigrant and her soldier son losing a leg in battle, are all translated into a wider political discourse in the poems. The most significant incidents for Smith during these turbulent years are primarily personal ones, with the most affecting experience of all being the death of her daughter, Anna Augusta, in 1795. Despite having watched three of her sons die, it was the death of this daughter in childbirth which caused her the most visible anguish and from which she never recovered, describing it as a 'blow that has indeed crushed me to the earth' (cited in Hiblish, p. 180). She wrote to a friend of the deep and overwhelming grief it engendered: '[i]n the midst of perplexity and distress, till the loss of my child, which fell like the hand of death upon me, I could yet exert my faculties' (*ibid.*, p. 179), and referred to the loss in the footnote to one of her poems as 'a deprivation which has rendered *my* life a living death' (*Poems*, p. 117).

Once more, however, Smith uses this private grief for political purposes, translating it into a public sorrow in the preface to *Marchmont*, the novel she was writing at the time, and making clear that her daughter's death was the consequence of oppression and tyranny in the public world:

....after having resisted, for twelve years, difficulties and distresses such as women are seldom called upon to encounter, *one* dreadful evil has overtaken me, and nearly overwhelmed me - that lovely Being who was the greatest blessing of my life, who alone had the power to soothe my wearied spirit and sweeten my hours of toil, has been torn from me forever; and this last and bitterest calamity I shall ever impute to the conduct of our inhuman oppressors. Yet, in the hour of my extreme misery, while I *dreaded*, and after I had suffered the severity, what did I receive from them - from these men who *then held*, who *still hold*, the property of my family? Refusal of the most necessary assistance, taunts, and insults[.] (cited in Hiblish, p. 180)

The relationship which is suggested by these lines between Smith and her daughter, seems to be a substitute for the closeness and bonding which Smith failed to find in married life. It is explicitly the tyranny of 'men' which has caused the sorrows in her life and finally the death of a beloved daughter. The mother/daughter bond, blessing, softening and sweetening life, is set in opposition to men, tyranny, oppression and inhumanity. The term 'these men' refers specifically here to the lawyers and the legal system they represent, from which Smith as a woman was excluded both in terms of rights and language, but also implicated here are the other men in her life who had caused her sufferings and to whose power and will she was still subject; these included her own father who married her off while she was still a child, her father-in-law who made an imprudent will keeping her inheritance from her, and her husband who controlled and squandered her money in reckless pursuits and gambling. Left to her own devices, once she had to some degree extracted herself from the control of men in her private life, she discovered that in the public world also she was subject to the tyranny and inequality of a legal system governed by men.¹³

Men not only offered nothing but hindrance to Smith financially they also provided no emotional support and the only emotional bond she retained was for her children, and in particular her daughter. The death of Anna Augusta becomes a recurring theme in her poetry and a metaphor for her helplessness in a world controlled by men. Sonnet 68, written very soon after her daughter's death, begs a divine influence calm her overwhelming grief: 'Fall, dews of Heaven, upon my burning breast,/Bathe with cool drops these ever-streaming eyes' (1). Religious comfort in this, as other sorrows of her life, eludes her however, and the tears shed for her daughter are 'unceasing' (Sonnet 78, 12). She is drawn to the physical loss of Anna and cannot be consoled by spiritual balms:

....save the portrait on my bleeding breast,
I have no semblance of that form adored,
That form, expressive of a soul divine,
So early blighted; and while life is mine,
With fond regret, and ceaseless grief deplored -
That grief, my angel! with too faithful art
Enshrines thy image in thy Mother's heart. (Sonnet 91, 8)

In 'April' she rejects nature also as a source of comfort, and rather laments that it looked so beautiful 'While dire Disease on all I loved was preying,/And flowers seem'd rising but to strew her grave!' (39). Refusing the standard eighteenth century consolations of nature and God, Smith makes clear in her poetry, as in the preface to *Marchmont*, that the death of Anna Augusta was a consequence of political tyranny. In 'Ode to Death' she describes her helplessness in the face of the British legal system, from whom she is 'too much impoverished to obtain/....right' (9), and of whom she only 'implores....aid in vain?' (10). Instead she has to watch 'in pale dismay' (21), the 'angel form' she 'could not save' (22), as her daughter is to death's 'cold arms consign'd' (17) in a horrid mimicry of a mother's warm embrace. Finally defeated by men, the death of her daughter reveals to Smith the true extent of her powerlessness and she can only long for 'the last sleep of death' (Sonnet 74, 5) which will reunite the mother with 'her, whose loss in anguish I deplore' (13) so that she 'feel[s] that loss no more' (14).

Despite the tone of suicidal despair expressed in these poems, the taking of her own life was hardly an option for a mother with so many children dependent on her, and Smith continued to write after her daughter's death in order to support these remaining children. Leigh Hunt suggests that she may have taken to eating opium at this time with her close friend Lady Henrietta O'Neill and Hiblish remarks that 'Mrs. Smith's grief was such that her physicians may have considered the drug necessary' (Hiblish, p. 182). Certainly a number of poems written after Anna's death register a desire for forgetfulness which in the absence of the option of suicide may have found an alternate mode of release. Sonnet 41, 'To Oblivion' could be read as an attempt to justify the use of opium, declaring 'I only ask exemption from the pain' (8) and in Sonnet 88, entitled 'Nepenthe', she refers to this mythical magical opiate as an 'oblivious draft' (3) which could 'staunch the bleeding of the heart' (4). The idea that Smith shared her opium eating with Lady O'Neill is suggested by the fact that the two women express a similar agenda through their poetry. In a poem written by O'Neill at Smith's request for inclusion in *Desmond*, 'Ode to the Poppy', she celebrates opium in the same terms, as an alternative to suicide:

I hail the Goddess for her scarlet flower!
Thou brilliant weed,
Thou dost so far exceed,
The richest gifts gay Flora can bestow;
....
And I will sing of thee alone;
Unless, perchance, the attributes of grief,
The cypress bud, and willow leaf,
Their pale, funereal foliage, blend with thine. (7; 22)¹⁴

The nature of the solace that both women acquire from this 'Soul-soothing plant' (33), which serves as an alternative to death, is a far cry from the kind of pleasure that their male contemporaries derived from the drug, functioning for Smith and O'Neill less as a means of deriving enjoyment from life than of surviving its horrors.

Smith published her last novel *The Young Philosopher* in 1798 and in the preface as usual documented her ongoing legal struggles. The preface also tries to anticipate charges of plagiarism against certain passages in the novel which contain incidents similar to those in Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman*, and in leaping to her own imagined defence Smith takes the opportunity to declare her support for Wollstonecraft, whose name was by this date blackened with the publication of Godwin's *Memoir* a few months earlier, in January of this year. This preface is dated June 6 1798 and as the *Memoir* caused immediate scandal it is unlikely that Smith wrote without an awareness of the implications of her expression of support:

[the] incident of the confinement in a madhouse of one of my characters was designed before I saw the fragment of 'The Wrongs of Woman,' by a Writer whose talents I greatly honoured, and whose death I deeply regret; from her I should not blush to borrow, and if I had done so I should have acknowledged it. (cited in Hiblish, p. 194)

Considering the period at which these lines were written and published, this is a startling declaration of allegiance, and one which hints at a direct challenge to Richard Polwhele.

Polwhele's poem *The Unsex'd Females* was also published during this same year and in it he aligns Smith with Wollstonecraftian feminism because of her foray into the political in her novel, *Desmond*. But in her preface, instead of disassociating herself

from Wollstonecraft, Smith sides with the outlawed woman and certain aspects of Smith's defence of Wollstonecraft suggest that this preface might have been written in response to Polwhele's text.¹⁵ Polwhele is obsessed by blushes in his poem where they function as an indication of true feminine modesty, and according to him Wollstonecraft is 'a sworn enemy to blushes'; Smith uses this imagery against itself, writing that she 'should not blush' to be influenced by Wollstonecraft.¹⁶ Polwhele lingers over Wollstonecraft's death, observing that 'I cannot but think, that the Hand of Providence is visible, in her life, her death...she died a death that strongly marked the distinction of the sexes, by pointing out the destiny of women, and the diseases to which they are liable' (Polwhele, pp. 29-30); Smith challenges the self-righteous fatalism of this argument, calling Wollstonecraft's death 'untimely'. Since Wollstonecraft's death, like that of Smith's mother and daughter, was a consequence of childbirth, Polwhele's implication that women were to be punished in this way for abandoning their true role in life as Christian mothers, would have touched a raw nerve with Smith and may have antagonised her enough to make her publicly voice support for the dead woman. While it seems plausible, even likely, that Smith is formulating a direct retaliation to Polwhele in her preface, her support of the feminist figure could be explained more simply by the fact that there is a shared agenda between the two women, with Wollstonecraft's polemics on the sufferings that women endured in an unjust and patriarchal society finding a poignant realisation in Smith's own life, and Smith's own poems resonating with the wrongs that women suffered.

At the turn of the century Smith finally won the legal battle that she had spent most of her adult life fighting, although the victory was a pyrrhic one since the greatest proportion of the money had been poured away on legal fees. It was not moreover for another eight years and six months after her own death, that the settlement was finally concluded. Smith actually felt little benefit from the ending of this legal struggle, and by the early nineteenth century her financial position became worse than ever when her new trustee, the third Earl of Egremont, withheld the annual interest payments on her marriage settlements, so that by the 'beginning of 1803 Smith was destitute' (Todd and Blank, p. xxii) and barely able to afford food and coal. Her final years were also marred by illness, including a rheumatic condition

which affected her hands, making it painful to write. She continued to produce work to support herself however, turning from novels to educational books for children and utilising her growing interests in botany, ornithology and history. These topics also find their way into the poetry that she produced in these years culminating in *Beachy Head*, which was left unfinished at her death. She died on October 28 1806 aged fifty-seven, having outlived and so finally escaped the financial claims her estranged husband still held over her, by less than a year.

Contemporary Literary Status

Contemporary critical response to Smith's poetry and novels was on the whole extremely positive. In her lifetime, reviews of her poetry were almost always favourable, and many of the literary memoirs written immediately after her death describe a career which should have lived on in literary fame. The *Monthly Magazine* looks forward confidently to the canonisation of Smith's works:

Mrs. Smith's poetical works are too well known, and have been too long the admiration of the public, to require any farther illustration; the number of editions through which they have passed, sufficiently establishes their merit....the brilliancy of Mrs. Smith's genius will shine with undiminished lustre, as long as the English language exists. (*Monthly Magazine*, p. 248)

The European Magazine observes 'strong marks of pre-eminent genius, and striking features of original excellence' in her poetic works and writes that the 'genius' displayed by Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* 'procured them admirers, and obtained for their fair authoress a celebrity which has, in this respect, continued to the present hour'.¹⁷ But this writer also hints through the tense of another observation that while Smith should have achieved lasting literary fame, her celebrity had in fact already diminished by the time of her death: 'HER PEN was not only a mental but a pecuniary resource; which, if we consider its various and successful exertions, *ought* to have proved as PERMANENT as it was PROLIFIC' (*The European Magazine*, p. 339 [my emphasis]). Hopes for Smith's canonisation did indeed prove unfounded and her fame did not long outlast her death; Wordsworth writing towards the end of his life acknowledged in a note to an obscure poem the literary debt that English

poetry owed to Smith, describing her as 'a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be acknowledged or remembered'.¹⁸

There are other hints in biographies and literary reviews, that a reaction was setting in against Smith even within her own lifetime. The *Monthly Magazine* suggests that her 'novels....brought on her much undeserved abuse', but the reviewer defends Smith, suggesting that such remarks emanated from 'the stupid, the unfeeling, or the envious' and were 'not very surprising' since 'her intellectual superiority was too obvious to escape the shafts of envy and malignity' (*Monthly Magazine*, p. 248). Smith's open support of the French Revolution in *Desmond* and her declaration of her rights as a woman to write politically in that same novel had proved unpopular, but the argument put forward here is that the reaction against Smith was partly due to her excellence as a writer. A woman who wrote mediocre novels and verse might be tolerated by eighteenth century culture, but a woman who wrote well and influentially could only be perceived as a threat. Smith's sister Catherine Dorset echoes this evaluation but also suggests alternative reasons for the decline in Smith's popularity, writing in her memoir of the poet that '[i]f she derived a high degree of gratification in the homage paid to her talents, it was embittered by the envenomed shafts of envy and bigotry, and by the calumnies of anonymous defamers'; these attacks she suggests were based on two features of Smith's writing which transgressed what was considered proper in women's writing, either by omission or inclusion: '[b]y some she has been censured, because there is no religion in her works' and '[i]n introducing politics in one of her works, she incurred equal censure, and with greater reason; it was sinning against good taste in a female writer' (Dorset, p. 326). It is significant that Dorset dismisses the lack of religion in her sister's works, which is a more marked and constant feature of her writing than politics, with the comment that it was not 'then the fashion of the day as it has become since' to include much religion in novels, and points instead to the inclusion of politics as the main bone of contention, since this is an offence against acceptable behaviour in a 'female writer'.

In his *British Public Characters*, written during Smith's lifetime, Richard Phillips argues that her personal transgressions into the public sphere engendered similar criticism,

claiming that she 'created enemies by the zeal and perseverance with which she endeavoured to obtain justice for her children'.¹⁹ In a perceptive and surprisingly enlightened analysis, Phillips suggests that women writers drew down the full critical gaze of society, not only upon their fictions, but upon themselves:

The penalties and discouragements attending the profession of an author fall upon women with a double weight; to the curiosity of the idle and the envy of the malicious their sex affords a peculiar incitement: arraigned, not merely as writers, but as *women*, their characters, their conduct, even their personal endowments become the subjects of severe inquisition: from the common allowances claimed by the species, literary women appear only to be exempted. (Phillips, pp. 60-1)

If read in relation to Smith's life these lines suggest that her 'conduct' in separating from her husband and continuing to write in order to provide financial support for her family, may have had a direct effect on the reception of her poetry. As Phillips makes clear, women writers could never escape or leave behind them the question of their gender.

As with Barbauld's dissenting politics, there are some specific reasons which help to explain why Smith's work was so quickly forgotten and so long neglected. One problem is to do with changes in literary fashion and how Smith was constructed as a poet by her contemporaries. While Smith repeatedly strove to define herself outside the artificial perimeters of poetic melancholy, she was marketed as a poet of sensibility. Despite her attempts to persuade readers to the contrary, she was persistently seen in terms of a movement that later became extremely unpopular as a reaction set in against its excesses; as Janet Todd notes in her study of sensibility '[b]y the last decades of the century,...the tide began to turn against a sensibility which was judged effeminate, destabilizing....and detrimental to Christian precepts' (Todd (1986), pp. 61-2). When the reaction against the excesses of sensibility took place, Smith, who was seen as a key exponent of this type of poetry, was relegated to the margins of literary history.

The way in which Smith's poetry was positioned within the movement of sensibility, was inseparable from the way in which Smith the woman was seen to embody melancholic suffering. The poems were tied up with the persona of the living

woman who wrote them, and when she died the poems lost half their value for contemporary readers. As Deborah Kennedy notes in an essay on Smith's sonnets, '[c]ritics hardly ever reviewed her poems without commenting directly on her personal life' and 'chivalrously leapt to the defence of the respectable gentlewoman-in-distress, neglecting Smith's technical and imaginative achievements as a poet'.²⁰ She cites a reviewer in the *Critical Review* who exemplifies this response: '[w]e are sorry to see the eye which can shine with so much poetic fire, sullied with a tear, and we hope the soothings of the Muse may wipe it from her cheek' (cited in Kennedy, p. 49). This insistence on conflating the poetry with the poet's personal sufferings was of course partly a response to the way in which Smith marketed herself along with her poetry. Jacqueline M. Labbe in 'Selling One's Sorrows: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and the Marketing of Poetry' formulates an argument that Smith's self-construction was a deliberate strategic act, since 'self-presentation as a woman stricken with loss allows her an entry into the poetic market' and consequently readers 'see not just poems, but the poets, not just authors, but women in distress'.²¹ I would suggest however, that while Smith does insert herself into the prefaces of her poems as a marketable consumer product, she is also using the public voice granted her poetically for political as well as economic ends, to condemn the social conditions which force her to publish for a living and to lay bare the miserable physical, legal, social and psychic condition in which eighteen century women lived. This may be read as an early act of feminism, which we can see in hindsight engendered a sense of chivalrous protection in male readers, without opening their eyes to the wider issues involved.

Recent Critical Reassessment

Like Barbauld, Smith is undergoing critical reassessment at the present time; a number of useful essays have appeared in recent years on her novels as well as a handful on her poetry. While few of this latter collection offer challenging reassessments of Smith as a poet, there are some who offer interesting readings of her work. Matthew Bray for example, in an article published in 1993 in *The Wordswoth Circle*, reads *Beachy Head* unconventionally, not as a nationalist celebration of Britain in the face of the Napoleonic threat but in terms of its 'Francocentric Vision' which he suggests actually functions as a critique of British nationalist

discourse.²² Deborah Kennedy in an essay on Smith's sonnets, while continuing to place Smith within the tradition of melancholic versifying, does attempt to establish some difference between Smith's melancholy poetics and that of her male contemporaries, and reads the poems in proto-feminist terms. The most significant critical development in relation to Smith's poetry is the publication in 1993 by Oxford University Press of her complete poems, edited by Stuart Curran. However, the way in which Smith comes to us textually is further problematised by this volume, which was noted in early reviews for its shortcomings:

in spite of the fact that the series is intended to promote knowledge of early women writers, the volume lacks certain basic information commonly provided in texts of its kind. There is no chronology of the author, little biographical or critical material, and no bibliography of scholarly work on Smith.²³

More problematic however than all of these textual omissions, and some are very great, is the fact that this volume appeared in print in Britain only briefly and is now available only in the United States.

Despite the problems that the Curran edition of Smith's poems presents, the fact that a scholarly edition of her poetry has been published would indicate a significant revival of interest in this much neglected poet. Curran suggests in his introduction that Smith was 'highly politicized' in her 'vision' (Poems, p. xxv) but although this poet is beginning to undergo a critical reassessment, this aspect of her work is still underplayed. The following chapters reinvest Smith's poetry with its political significance and focus in particular on the ways in which her poems interact with a specific historical moment from a woman's perspective through form, content and imagery. My reading of Smith's poetry will look at the ways in which she addresses key political issues such as the French emigrants, the British legal system, poverty, and the ongoing national antagonism between France and Britain, but also at the way in which she charts her own personal condition of depression, helplessness and hopeless misery, which is in itself a political attack on the sexual ideology responsible for this suffering. Smith's poetry challenges the artificial confines of sensibility, since it seems to fall within that movement, and yet exceeds it in terms of passion and hopeless despair. Her poetry is far from artificial, in fact it is innovative and original;

she is not weeping 'because a sparrow dies' (253) or 'rav[ing] in 'artificial ecstasies' (254) as Hannah More characterised exponents of sensibility, but mourning a life which she could only figure in terms of loss: of mother, children, husband, inheritance, legal rights, political rights, education, and friends, a life which in her poetry could only be resolved in the desire for a loss of self.²⁴

Notes

¹ Florence Hiblish, *Charlotte Smith: Poet and Novelist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941), p. 237.

² Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 53.

³ Stuart Curran, 'Introduction', *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. xix-xxix (p. xix).

⁴ Linda Anderson, 'At the Threshold of the Self: Women and Autobiography', in *Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory*, ed. by Moira Monteith (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 54-71 (p. 64).

⁵ Mitzi Myers, 'Pedagogy as Self-Expression in Mary Wollstonecraft: Exorcising the Past, Finding a Voice', in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 192-210 (pp. 192-3).

⁶ Anna Seward for example scorned Smith for her 'indelicacy' in holding up to 'public contempt' the man 'whose name she bears' (cited in Janet Todd and Antje Blank, 'Introduction', in *Desmond*, by Charlotte Smith, ed. by Janet Todd and Antje Blank [London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997], pp. xi-xxxix [p. xix]).

⁷ Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', in *The Newly Born Woman* by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, trans. by Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), pp. 63-132 (p. 92).

⁸ 'Memoirs of Eminent Persons: Mrs. Charlotte Smith', *Monthly Magazine*, 23 (April 1807), pp. 244-8 (244).

⁹ Mrs. [Catherine] Dorset, 'Charlotte Smith', in *The Lives of the Novelists*, by Sir Walter Scott (London: Dent, [n.d.]), pp. 302-334 (p. 305).

¹⁰ *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). All subsequent quotations from Smith's poetry are taken from this edition and first line numbers only given in parenthesis in the text.

¹¹ Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction 1660-1800* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. 203.

¹² Cited in Alan Dugald McKillop, 'Charlotte Smith's Letters', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 15 (1951-2), 237-55 (pp. 238-9).

¹³ In fact under eighteenth century marriage laws Smith was never able to extract her own legal rights from her husband's power, a situation of which she was only too aware: 'My marriage articles....make no provision for a separation. I was not quite fifteen when my father married me to Mr Smith and too childish to know the dismal fate that was preparing for me. Everything my Father gave me then (3000 £) was settled on him for his life; and £ 2000 more which comes to me after the death of my Fathers Widow...., is disposed in the same manner; so that for me I see no other prospect than being the slave of the Booksellers as long as my health or fancy hold out' (cited in McKillop, p. 239). Even the earnings which Smith accrued from her literary endeavours were not her own and a portion of the royalties she earned continued to be paid to her husband until his death.

¹⁴ 'Ode to the Poppy', in Charlotte Smith's *Desmond*, ed. by Janet Todd and Antje Blank (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1987), pp. 325-7.

¹⁵ Although Polwhele's poem appeared some time after the publication of Godwin's *Memoir* in January 1798, I have so far been unable to establish in what month it was published and whether or not therefore it appeared before Smith wrote her preface in June. It was reviewed in September, but this, while proving that the poem appeared before this date, does not bring us any closer to establishing the actual date of publication, since frequently several months passed before a poem was reviewed. It is therefore possible that *The Unsex'd Females* was published before Smith wrote her preface at the beginning of June, and as it mentions her by name, it seems likely that had this been the case, she would have read it.

¹⁶ Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798), p. 13.

¹⁷ 'J. M', 'Literary Notice of the Late Charlotte Smith', *European Magazine*, 50 (November 1806), pp. 339-41 (p. 339 and p. 340)

¹⁸ See notes to 'Stanzas Suggested in a Steamboat off Saint Bees' Heads, on the Coast of Cumberland' (*The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson, rev. by Ernest de Selincourt [London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1953], p. 724).

¹⁹ Richard Phillips, 'Mrs. Charlotte Smith', in *British Public Characters for the Year 1800-1801*, 8 vols (London: Printed for Richard Phillips, 1807), III, pp. 42-64 (p. 61).

²⁰ Deborah Kennedy, 'Thorns and Roses: the Sonnets of Charlotte Smith', *Women's Writing* 2:1 (1995), 43-53 (p. 49).

²¹ Jacqueline M. Labbe, 'Selling One's Sorrows: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and the Marketing of Poetry', *The Wordswoth Circle*, 25:2 (1994), 68-71 (p. 68).

²² Matthew Bray, 'Removing the Anglo-Saxon Yoke: The Francocentric Vision of Charlotte Smith's Later Poems', *The Wordswoth Circle*, 24:3 (1993), 155-8.

²³ Deborah Kennedy, 'The Poems of Charlotte Smith', ed. Stuart Curran. A Review', *The Wordswoth Circle*, 25:4 (1994), 259-60 (p. 259).

²⁴ Hannah More, 'Sensibility: A Poetic Epistle to the Hon. Mrs Boscawen', in *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

The Sonnets: Female Suffering and Transgressive Desire

The Sonnet Debate: 'In Bold Defiance of Literary Conventions'

Charlotte Smith's contemporary literary fame arose initially with the publication of *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1784 and although she later became a popular novelist, many considered poetry to be her first and best genre. These included Anna Barbauld who, when reviewing Smith's career, wrote that 'Mrs. Smith's genius seems to have been more to poetry than to any other walk of literature' and acknowledged that '[h]er Sonnets....were universally admired'.¹ Although Smith was a key figure in the revival of the sonnet movement in the 1780's and though Wordsworth and Coleridge identified her as such, she later became represented as a sonneteer 'of secondary importance', so that the chronology of literary history jumps from 'Cowper to Wordsworth' leaving out the key instigators of the sonnet's revival, Smith and Bowles, altogether.² This change is partly due to Coleridge's later decision to exclude Smith from his discussion of sonneteers in *Biographia Literaria* despite his prior acknowledgement of her instrumental contribution to the development of this genre.³ It was initially an article by Bishop Hunt, appearing in *The Wordsworth Circle* in 1970, which re-established Smith as an important figure in literary history, but only in the context of her direct influence on Wordsworth. In Hunt's discussion of Smith's sonnets he limits her contribution to helping 'to establish the sonnet as a proper vehicle for the expression of melancholy and sorrowful meditation'.⁴

Stuart Curran has more recently offered an impressively radical assessment of Smith's contribution to literature, arguing in his seminal essay, 'The I Altered', that '[t]he entire sonnet revival of the Romantic period was impelled into existence' by the vision contained in *Elegiac Sonnets*.⁵ In his chapter on sonnets in *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* Curran also affords Smith reasonable space and importantly raises the status of the literary scene in the 1780s, arguing that it represented not merely an 'indulgence in raw nerves and emotional excess' but a 'genuine artistic movement', a

movement with which Smith was closely involved.⁶ He notes that ‘the sonnet virtually disappeared from the British shores in the century after Milton’s death’, and identifies Smith as the key figure in the 1780s when that genre was being ‘bent, stretched, reshaped, rethought’ (Curran [1986], p. 29 and p. 30). Smith’s use and revival of this form engendered a literary debate involving many of the key literary figures of the period. This debate, though little remembered now, is interesting in that it illustrates the way in which at this time political issues were translated into and argued out in diverse realms, including the artistic and the cultural spheres. The debate centred on the question of form and involved those who favoured adherence to the rigid Italian form, most conspicuously Anna Seward, and those like Smith who advocated a freer approach to the genre. As such it takes on the key political tension of the period, between reactionary conservative forces and the liberal movement towards progress and freedom.

The eighteenth century sonnet debate has recently been addressed by Daniel Robinson in his essay ‘Reviving the Sonnet: Women Romantic Poets and the Sonnet Claim’ in which he, like Curran, makes a case for the significance of the form in terms of women’s writing, suggesting that it was ‘deliberately claimed’ by women ‘in order to legitimize themselves as poets’.⁷ Robinson however, takes Seward as the prime example of his analysis, arguing that it is this desire for legitimization which is the subtext to her rigid adherence to the correct form:

By writing what she believes are legitimate sonnets after her great poetic predecessors, Seward appropriates an entirely male tradition and can claim herself as a great poet within that tradition, an important step for marginalized authors and, in many ways, a subversive one. (Robinson, pp. 102-3)

Smith’s refusal to be bound by the strict Petrarchan rules problematises Robinson’s argument that marginalised women poets looked for this kind of legitimization, and he is forced to admit that her sonnets are composed in ‘bold defiance of literary conventions’ (Robinson, p. 107), offering little in the way of analysis of the politics of this rejection of legitimacy. In fact while Robinson uses Seward as a key figure in the establishment of the notion of legitimacy in sonnets, *Elegiac Sonnets* was published in 1784, some 15 years before Seward’s collection appeared in print under

the title of *Original Sonnets*, and it is Smith herself who sets out the terms of the debate in the preface to the first edition of her sonnets:

The little Poems which are here called Sonnets, have, I believe, no very just claim to that title: but they consist of fourteen lines, and appear to me no improper vehicle for a single Sentiment. I am told, and I read it as the opinion of very good judges, that the legitimate Sonnet is ill-calculated for our language.⁸

Smith's use of the term 'legitimate' here as the defining term of the sonnet debate renders hers by implication 'illegitimate', with all the accompanying connotations of impropriety and non-conformity that this word carries. It was Smith who primarily challenged in print the eighteenth century's dislike of the sonnet form, voiced most memorably by Dr. Johnson, and carved out new possibilities for the long unpopular genre.⁹ The fact that the form was so unpopular at this time and that Smith chose to go against the force of popular opinion with her usage of the sonnet, would suggest that it was in some way intrinsic to her project. The heated debate she engendered came to the forefront of literary circles with the popular literary journals of the day joining in and many, perhaps surprisingly, supporting Smith's use of the form on aesthetic and linguistic grounds. The *Monthly Review* writes that:

That recurrence of the rhyme which, in conformity to the Italian model, some writers so scrupulously observe, is by no means essential to this species of composition, and is frequently as inconvenient as it is unnecessary. The English language can boast of few good Sonnets. They are in general harsh, formal, and uncouth: faults entirely owing to the pedantic and childish affectation of interchanging the rhymes after the manner of the Italians. The slightest attention to the peculiarities of the respective languages might evince the propriety of the copy, in this point, deviating from the original.¹⁰

Another critic writing in 1792, indicating that the debate continued for a number of years, writes that Smith's 'illegitimate sonnets (for the spiritual court of criticism has thought proper to bastardize them)' could be compared favourably to the sonnets of Milton, and defends her use of a flexible rhyming scheme.¹¹

Anna Seward did become one of the more vociferous commentators in the debate, frequently airing her disapproval of Smith's more flexible use of the sonnet form

and arguing for strict adherence to the original form as it was first designed by Petrarch. Ironically, Seward in fact based her understanding of the Italian sonnet on Milton's adaptation of that form and on eighteenth century misunderstandings of the Petrarchan sonnet. As Dexter Havens points out in *The Influence of Milton On English Poetry*, the eighteenth century was not only ignorant of the bipartite structure of the Italian sonnet, but also of the significance of the order of rhymes. He suggests that it was in fact incorrect definitions of the sonnet in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771-1824) and Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* 1728 and 1752 which may have 'led Miss Seward astray and caused her irregular quatrains to be accepted as legitimate'.¹² Seward defined a legitimate sonnet as a quatorzain which had the rhythm of blank verse and which contained only two rhymes in the octave. She allowed a concluding couplet in her definition, even though the absence of this is the single most defining characteristic of the Petrarchan sonnet, probably because Milton ended one sonnet in this way and in so doing set a precedent which many later sonneteers imitating the Italian followed. This definition, which Seward adhered strictly to in her sonnets, is far from being an accurate definition of a 'legitimate' Petrarchan sonnet. While in the preface to *Original Sonnets* (1799) Seward claims that all but nine of the hundred sonnets were legitimate, as Havens notes,

[i]n reality, 62 of the sonnets are not legitimate; 26 of them would be if it were not for the final couplet, and so would six more but for irregularities in the order of rimes in the sestet, while the remaining 30 have irregular octaves. Twenty of these last she considered legitimate, because she disregarded the order in which the rimes occur. (Havens, p. 500).

Clearly Seward's own pretensions towards legitimacy of form were unfounded, since she based her definition upon only selective features of the original Petrarchan sonnet. It is in not keeping to these selective aspects that Smith unfairly came under censure from Seward, and in particular her not limiting the number of rhymes in the octave to two.

In contrast to Seward's Miltonic/pseudo-Italian model Smith favoured the Shakespearian model which Seward discounted entirely. In her breakdown of the rhyming pattern of Smith's sonnets, Hiblish points out that in 44 sonnets Smith

conforms to the Shakespearian model of three stanzas of alternate rhyme closing with a couplet: *a b a b c d c d e f e f g g*, in one to the Spensarian model, and in one to the Petrarchan, leaving 46 which are completely irregular and which do not conform to any of the models available in the eighteenth century. Interestingly, the only sonnet which is strictly Petrarchan in its conformity to that strict rhyming scheme is Sonnet 32 ‘To Melancholy’, which as I will show in the next section is the only sonnet in which Smith conforms to the conventional model of melancholic poetry, indicating that her use of the sonnet form was carefully tailored to reflect and shape the content of her poem. Smith’s frequent use of the concluding couplet also has a profound effect on the way we read her poems. It is used by Smith not just to sum up the previous argument but also to emphasise and reiterate her hopeless position in a final and conclusive way. Unlike the Petrarchan model which splits into two halves, with the problem set out in the octave and the perspective turned or the problem solved in the sestet, Smith’s practice of describing a single feeling throughout and closing with a couplet induces a mood of hopelessness. There is no opening left at the end of the sonnet for future change, with these concluding couplets putting the lid on her sorrow and reiterating her hopeless position. Many of the poems end with this air of finality and with an accompanying image of destroyed happiness: the ‘wither’d heath, and barren thorn’ (Sonnet 63), ‘a broken-heart’ (Sonnet 64), ‘eyes suffused with tears’ (Sonnet 68). The couplet functions to seal in her misery, to both contain and reaffirm it, but as I will go on to suggest later in the chapter, this build up of pressure threatens to break free, and while the poet’s own desires seem to be abandoned in favour of a passive despair, there is evidence in these sonnets of those desires imploding the structure from within.

Several points emerge from this debate. Firstly, that Smith was not merely another writer of clichéd sentimental verse; she was in fact innovative and made an important contribution to literary history, including sparking off a vibrant contemporary literary debate which may well be seen to reflect other more overtly politicised debates at this time. Hiblish suggests that in the ‘[m]odifications of her rhyme scheme’ Smith ‘reveal[s] her freedom from restraint within a regulated design’ (Hiblish, p. 246); these experimentations with the sonnet form certainly suggest a desire to be innovative and original in her poetry, something she is little credited for

now, but her refusal to conform rigidly to literary precedents and models also has a political significance which Hiblish and Robinson miss. It is no coincidence that Smith with her more liberal, progressive political opinions advocates flexibility and individuality within literary tradition, whereas Seward, who was firmly positioned on the side of Polwhele's 'proper', conservative lady writers, steadfastly argues for rigid conformity to the rules of literary tradition. While I would not go so far as to suggest that Smith's use of the sonnet form is in itself a political gesture, at this period most aspects of social and cultural life came under scrutiny in political terms and it could be argued that her advocacy of freedom from the fixed rules of the sonnet form is reflective of, and informed by, her liberal political principles.

In making the unusual choice of the sonnet form for her first collection of poems, Smith also chose the most appropriate vehicle for the expression of her own psychological and social condition. The sonnet, even with some lapses of rhyming scheme, is a tight and restricted form in which to work, a form which belonged in Britain almost entirely to the great literary fathers of tradition, Shakespeare and Milton. The form in fact mimics the entrapment and the rigid rules of propriety which encircle Smith, the woman poet, as she writes. The criticism from 'proper' lady writers when she attempted to breach even some of the smaller rules of the form, is indicative of the much wider public censure she brought down on herself when she transgressed the laws of propriety, firstly in leaving her husband and in arguing for her children's rights with lawyers, and then in publicising these events. Her use of the sonnet form enacts the thematic and linguistic message of her poems: a life constrained, ruled and rigidly circumscribed and within that containment, a mind which is reflected in storms and ruins. Her freedoms taken with the form would suggest an anarchic desire to exceed those rules, a desire which comes across in the imagery of the sonnets themselves, which read like emotional outbursts. The psychological despair which the poems portray seems to be barely contained by the form of the sonnet, and finds expression for release in lapses from the strict Italian form and more vividly, as I will show, in recurring images of storms and floods.

I want now to turn to the language and imagery of the sonnets, and again to examine these not in the abstract but in relation to contemporary discourses and

Smith's own contextualisation of the poems through her prefaces. The next section will address the question of the sonnets in relation to sensibility, the mode of writing with which they were and continue to be most closely identified. Here I will argue that in fact the psychological despair expressed in the poems exceeds the discourse of sensibility, and that her expression of female suffering is grounded in a political critique of social oppression. Having worked through the idea that it is a genuine and not artificial sorrow which is presented in the sonnets, I will go on to examine the ways in which Smith harnesses ocean imagery to express this sorrow, using this imagery for political ends as an expression of a female anger that threatens both the confines of the sonnet form, and implicitly, social order itself. Finally, I will look at the potent imagery of the sonnets in relation to the gendered discourse of the sublime, and suggest ways in which Smith appropriates this concept for her own empowerment while juggling uncomfortably with its representation of masculine power. I will suggest in this final section how these three core elements within the sonnets - excessive suffering, female transgressive desire, and the power of the sublime - come together, enabling Smith to explore the concept of an oblivion that functions as a further rejection of eighteenth century patriarchal law.

'A Despondence Which May Look Like Affectation': Exceeding the Discourse of Sensibility

Smith appears to signal a melancholic note with the title of *Elegiac Sonnets*, a collection which should perhaps be read as an elegy sequence lamenting the loss of her own happiness; as Deborah Kennedy in her essay on the sonnets notes, 'Smith was not mourning either a deceased person or an absent lover; instead she mourned her own self'.¹³ I want to examine the ways in which Smith's sonnets both work with the conventions of melancholic poeticising and yet exceed the rules of melancholic sensibility - setting themselves apart from that genre in both the type and degree of the suffering recorded - and to read them instead, as the record of a woman's suffering under a life of social oppression, and as the subtext to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This re-reading of Smith's sonnets is not merely a late twentieth century feminist act of reading against the grain; Smith herself sets the poems up to be read in this way and contemporary evaluations suggest that the collection sounded original even to the ear of critics well

tuned to the notes of sensibility. The writer of Smith's memoir in *The European Magazine* claims that at the time at which the collection appeared, 'the town was so satiated' with melancholy verse, that had the 'intrinsic merits' of Smith's poems not 'buoyed them up' they would probably 'have sunk under their title'.¹⁴ What I want to suggest is that Smith in fact appropriates the movement of sensibility, carefully using the idea of an elegy sequence to mourn the genuine loss of her own happiness, and politicising this by laying bare the causes of her suffering. To illustrate the ways in which Smith's poetry falls outside the limited confines of the melancholic tradition of sensibility I will refer to Thomas Warton's definitive poem of the genre, 'The Pleasure's of Melancholy' and to Janet Todd's recent critical study of the movement of sensibility, a study which although it does not look at Smith's work in any depth, does locate her within the tradition of melancholy poeticising.

Todd identifies a number of defining aspects of sensibility, using key poetic texts of that movement to illustrate her points. Primarily, she suggests, poets of sensibility depict themselves as excruciatingly sensitive to life's experiences; their poetic responses are wildly out of proportion to what they seem to be responding to, as a consequence of a poetic sensibility working on and heightening otherwise ordinary experiences. Smith does on some occasions suggest that the influence of the poetic muse on her life has caused her to experience pain more deeply, writing in the first sonnet of the collection that 'far, far happier is the lot of those/Who never learn'd her dear delusive art' (5), but unlike those who revel in and cultivate this exquisite pain, Smith argues that the 'Muse's favours cost' (13) is too great when it 'Points every pang, and deepens every sigh' (11).¹⁵ For the melancholic poet moreover there is an elitism in this enhanced experiencing of suffering which Smith also rejects; Warton notes that,

Few know the elegance of soul refin'd,
Whose soft sensation feels a quicker joy
From Melancholy's scenes. (92, [my emphasis])¹⁶

Although the sufferings expressed in Smith's sonnets are deeply personal, she detracts from the notion of the exclusiveness of her suffering in her prefaces where she points to the fact that misery was a widespread fact of eighteenth century life,

connecting her own personal experiences of tyranny at the hands of the legal system to wider questions of oppression in the international sphere, and suggesting that to write anything other than poetry which reflects this misery is to deny harsh reality:

It is indeed a melancholy truth, that at this time there is so much tragedy in real life, that those who having escaped private calamity, can withdraw their minds a moment from that which is general, very naturally prefer to melancholy books, or tragic representations, those lighter and gayer amusements, which exhilarate the senses, and throw a transient veil over the extensive and still threatening desolation, that overspreads this country, and in some degree, every quarter of the world. (*Poems*, pp. 11-12)

Smith's use of prefaces and copious footnotes is central to an understanding of her poems. The two discourses were always presented to the public side by side and to extract her sonnets, and anthologise them minus these prefaces, gives a lobotomised perspective of her agenda and has lead to her poetry being misread. While it was common in the 1780s and 90s to attach prefaces, notes, and annotations to poems, Smith's prefaces go beyond the more common pleas to the public for continued interest and thanks to patrons. Smith uses the prefaces quite deliberately to contextualise the sorrow of her poems, performing through them an eighteenth century act of public relations on herself. These prefaces politicise her poems by showing the causes of her unhappiness to be not a melancholic imagination but social tyranny. They are her platform for public complaint, and her only real permitted access to a public space in which she could express her grievances.

Although Warton and other melancholy poets did try to present their poems as spontaneous responses to experience, there is an essential artificiality in sensibility which exhibits their synthetic affectation. Hannah More, writing in 1782 defines sensibility as '[t]o rave in artificial ecstasies' (254), and Todd notes that 'sensibility exaggerates pain' (Todd, p. 61).¹⁷ Smith however, tries repeatedly in her prefaces to distinguish her sonnets from the poetics of melancholy and to establish the sorrow expressed not as an oversensitised poetic effusion, but as a genuine and realistic response to a life of misery, by cataloguing the very real social oppressions under which she suffered. As editions of her poetry progressed the explanations for the sorrows expressed in her sonnets grew increasingly more specific. In the preface to

the sixth edition, published in 1792, she writes of her sonnets 'It was unaffected sorrow drew them forth: I wrote mournfully because I was unhappy' (*Poems*, p. 5), and goes on to blame her treatment at the hands of the British legal profession for that 'apparent despondence, which, when it is observed for a long series of years, may look like affectation' (p. 6). By 1797 she was producing long bitter prefaces about the hardships and oppressions she suffered which left the reader in no doubt that her misery was authentic: 'I am unhappily exempt from the suspicion of feigning sorrow for an opportunity of shewing the pathos with which it can be described - a suspicion which has given rise to much ridicule' (*Poems*, p. 11). These explanations finally generated some measure of understanding on the part of her contemporaries that Smith was in fact voicing a genuine sorrow, as one sonnet written to Smith and published anonymously in the *European Magazine* of 1786 suggests:

For sure than thine more sweet no strains can flow,
Than thine no tender plaints the heart can move,
More rouse the soul to sympathetic love;
And yet - sad source! they spring from REAL WOE.
(cited in Hiblish, p. 255)

Despite Smith's own attempt to set her sonnets apart from the artificial and exaggerated responses of sensibility, and to construct them instead as a reasonable response to a life of great suffering, later critics have continued to identify her work, to its detriment, almost entirely with that movement's excesses.

Another central feature of sensibility which Todd identifies the key exponents of melancholy verse adhering to, and which stands in contrast to Smith's poetical agenda, is the transmutation of pain into pleasure: 'misery or adversity' are 'converted into pleasure by the sensitive poetical mind' (Todd, p. 54). Consequently melancholic settings are sought out by the likes of Warton since they engender this distinctive rapture:

O lead me, queen sublime, to solemn glooms
Congenial with my soul; to cheerless shades,
To ruin'd seats, to twilight cells and bow'r's
Where thoughtful Melancholy loves to muse. (Warton, 17)

Although Smith is drawn to settings similar to those described here in her poetry, these do not bring her pleasure but rather reflect almost brutally the misery of her life. They are the interior condition of her mind turned outwards and displayed with all its horrors on the landscape. The 'bleak coast of some unfriendly isle,/Cold, barren, desart, where no harvests smile' (Sonnet 43, 2) reflects her 'heartless pain' and 'blank despair' (7). Smith sets up the expectations of melancholy poetry through this scene setting only to subvert them:

The dark and pillowy cloud, the sallow trees,
Seem o'er the ruins of the year to mourn;
And, cold and hollow, the inconstant breeze
Sobs thro' the falling leaves and wither'd fern. (Sonnet 42, 1)

Instead of seeking out this scene to experience the 'deep-felt joys' (Warton, 299) that Warton experiences, Smith is drawn to it because it reflects a pain already present, and she 'mourn[s]' along with the 'dark clouds' and 'sallow trees'. Smith rejects spring and summer scenes not because she prefers the melancholy winter night, but because 'no gay change revolving seasons bring' (11) can 'call forth pleasure from the soul of pain!' (12) or 'chase the vulture Care - that feeds upon the heart' (14). In another sonnet she makes even more explicit the connection between the outer scene and her inner anguish, writing that 'only beings as forlorn as I,/Court the chill horrors of the howling blast' and that:

The scene where Ruin saps the mouldering tomb,
Suits with the sadness of a wretch undone.
Nor is the deepest shade, the keenest air,
Black as my fate, or cold as my despair. (Sonnet 67, 11)

The melancholy setting is shown to be inadequate as a means of expressing the true depths of Smith's misery, and as its darker aspects echo her inner turmoil, there is no poetic conversion from pain to pleasure such as we find in Warton, for whom these scenes bring 'sweeter transport' (Warton, 155) and who asks with the naïveté of one who only plays at suffering, 'Is there a Pleasure like the pensive mood....?' (Warton, 168), a question which makes a mockery of Smith's genuine misery.

In her useful essay exploring the ‘coherent autobiographical persona’ in Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets*, Deborah Kennedy places Smith in the melancholic tradition but does see her as ‘atypical in actually seeking *relief* from her misery’, noting that in all but one of her sonnets ‘melancholy is an affliction which is devoid of pleasure’ (Kennedy, p. 43 and p. 44). I want to suggest, however, that Smith constructs an emotional and psychological experience which is not only very different to that of melancholy, but which is in fact defined in relation to it. Only in Sonnet 32 does Smith conform to the model of melancholic verse, in what is perhaps the least personal of all her sonnets and which is given a title typical of the period, ‘To Melancholy’. Here melancholy is presented conventionally as an abstraction, as a ‘magic power’ (12) whose dreams can ‘soothe the pensive visionary mind’ (14). It reads as a stock sonnet of the period and is lacking in the emotional intensity which characterises most of Smith’s sonnets. In placing it among her other sonnets the hollowness of the conventions of melancholy are laid bare and the anguish expressed in these other poems heightened. More importantly, by using melancholy in this conventional way on this occasion Smith effectively sets the sorrow described in her other sonnets apart as something quite different.

Smith in fact builds up her own vocabulary throughout the sonnets to describe her psychological and emotional state. The most commonly recurring words she uses are sorrow, care, despair, pain, anguish and misery, and in fact the word ‘melancholy’ appears only three times in all ninety-two sonnets. The terms she does use are frequently given as abstractions and these take on the physical damage performed on the female body: ‘Pale Sorrow’ (Sonnet 3, 9), ‘Sorrow’s drooping form and faded cheek’ (Sonnet 30, 7), and ‘Care’s wan and hollow cheek’ (Sonnet 88, 5). Although within the tradition of sensibility certain physical effects are often described, these are more commonly blushes and tears, melancholy does not produce the devastating, almost consumptive destruction of the body which Smith describes here. This physical anaemia and emaciation is of course only the most visible effect of Smith’s internal breakdown and the terms she employs to describe her psychological state are even more relentlessly specific: ‘hopeless care’ (Sonnet 25, 5), ‘deep depression’ (Sonnet 39, 5), ‘blank despair’ (Sonnet 43, 8), ‘murder’d

'Happiness' (Sonnet 47, 8), 'hopeless grief' (Sonnet 78, 14), 'languid, hopeless sorrow' (Sonnet 84, 7) and 'bitterest anguish' (9).

Through the use of the adjectives in these terms Smith effectively sets herself apart from those she dubs in Sonnet 80, 'Melancholy's votaries'. In this sonnet she breaks down and makes explicit the difference between her own state and that of the melancholic poet. Melancholy she explains is a 'Mild Sorrow, such as Hope has not forsook' (5), whereas her condition, as she repeatedly tells us is, 'hopeless' and her sorrow is not mild but extreme and life destroying. Here she uses the melancholic scene more dynamically to establish a difference between her suffering and that of the exponents of melancholy. For while the followers of melancholy 'delight' (2) in the moon and 'love to muse beneath' its 'silent reign' (6), Smith tells us that 'I prefer from some steep rock to look/On the obscure and fluctuating main' (7). This leads me on to what I want to suggest is the central and most pervasive image in Smith's sonnets, and also in her poetical oeuvre as a whole: the ocean. The sea, coastal settings, and water imagery reappear almost obsessively in her poetry, and in this sonnet she connects that imagery to her own psychological state; it is emblematic of her inner turmoil and stands in contrast to the more typical setting of melancholy, the moonlit evening. It is as if degrees of sorrow are registered by the landscape; a moonlit evening represents a melancholic 'Mild Sorrow', whereas Smith's 'ceaseless anguish' (Sonnet 88, 8) and her sense of being 'o'erwhelm'd with grief' (Sonnet 68, 14) are registered more adequately in surging oceans, storms at sea, and floods as the waters overwhelm the land. Smith herself tells us repeatedly that what her sonnets describe is not a melancholic mind but one subsumed by a debilitating depression and misery. There an emotional validity here which stands as a dramatic achievement for an author working alongside a tradition that celebrates a very specific kind of artificial aesthetic pain.

Female Desire and Social Transgression: Harnessing the Ocean

There are a number of key images which recur almost obsessively throughout *Elegiac Sonnets*, and which function as expressions of the suffering which Smith endured and about which propriety demanded she remain silent. Deborah Kennedy identifies thorns and roses as one such set of images which, she suggests, Smith uses

subversively in order to counter contemporary ideological constructions of femininity: '[b]y using the image of the rose as a symbol of her suffering, Smith implies that the truth about her experience, if not women's experience in general, can be found in the thorns - harshness, and pain - not in the flowers associated with femininity' (Kennedy, p. 51). Kennedy reads a political significance into these images suggesting that 'the thorns are a phallic image representing the patriarchal oppression that is the real cause of the speaker's misery' (*ibid.*). I want to pursue the political significance of Smith's use of ocean imagery, which I have already identified as another key emblem of her suffering, and to suggest that this goes beyond a representation of pain, offering Smith the potential for transgression and for the expression of her desires.

Sea imagery is often taken to have special significance in women's writing and as the repeated images of thorns and roses which Kennedy identifies in Smith's sonnets have a gendered significance through ideological registers, so does the sea have a gendered symbolism in mythological terms. Hélène Cixous is repeatedly drawn to water in her theories of women's writing and Toril Moi suggests that this link signals Cixous' 'investment in the world of myth' in which 'water is the feminine element *par excellence*'.¹⁸ For countless mythologies ocean imagery is connected to women and Cixous extends this to female discourse; in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' she describes woman's 'self-seeking text....a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea' and suggests that 'our seas are what we make of them, full of fish or not, opaque or transparent, red or black, high or smooth, narrow or bankless'.¹⁹ More than this it is in seas that a woman finds her own self: 'and we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, sea-weed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves' (Cixous, p. 889). As I have shown, Smith does closely identify her own psychological condition with oceans in her sonnets in which, as in Cixous' 'lively combination', the sea appears in all of its various moods. In one sonnet she figures a coastal scene as apocalyptic and imbued with ominous though ambiguous significance:

What time the martial star with lurid glare,
Portentous, gleams above the troubled deep;
Or the red comet shakes his blazing hair;

Or on the fire-ting'd waves the lightnings leap[.] (Sonnet 80, 9)

On another occasion she describes the ocean as an emblem of stillness and peace: a 'low, retiring tide' (Sonnet 40, 1) which 'In distant murmurs hardly seems to flow' (2) as 'sinks the day-star in the rosy West' (5).

The sea then is crucial to Smith's perception of herself and the world, which she describes as 'the world of waters' (Sonnet 40, 3). However, the ocean scene which recurs most frequently and most vividly in her poems, and with which she seems to identify most closely, is a turbulent stormy ocean, dark and gloomy, and racked with frenzied waves. In this imagery Smith finds the closest representation of her interior mind turned outwards:

O'er the dark waves the winds tempestuous howl;
The screaming sea-bird quits the troubled sea:
But the wild gloomy scene has charms for me,
And suits the mournful temper of my soul. (Sonnet 12, 5)

In another sonnet she links the 'turbid water, rude and dark' (9) with her own 'despair' (4) and set against this is the 'trembling light' (11) of the North Star, which represents 'short rays of reason' (Sonnet 23, 13). Reason is not set here against the darkness of superstition but against an overwhelming and debilitating, depression and misery, which allows little room for intellectual activity and rational thought. In Sonnet 81 Smith expresses her envy for a figure who is significantly gendered male and is 'unpursued by care' (5), and who is thus free to 'wander in the wild woodland scene' (2) 'by calm reason led' (12). For Smith with her 'Sorrows that Sense refuses to forget' (Sonnet 48, 4) reason functions only to torment and aggravate her unhappiness.

The ocean is then on one level a potent image of Smith's grief: deep, dark, consuming, overflowing, terrifying and seemingly boundless; it is also an emblem of her depression-racked mind: turbulent, stormy and dark. I want to pursue this imagery and its significance, in Smith's depiction of a specific historical incident which appears on two separate occasions in *Elegiac Sonnets*, and to locate there an anarchic desire, which stands in sharp contrast to Polwhele's reading of this

woman's poems as 'charming', 'Sweetly picturesque', breathing 'softened sorrow' and a 'romantic air'.²⁰ In Sonnet 44 'Written in the church-yard at Middleton in Sussex' Smith first describes a historical incident in which the sea actually floods the land, exhuming the bodies buried in the churchyard with the force of its waves:

The sea no more its swelling surge confines,
But o'er the shrinking land sublimely rides.
The wild blast, rising from the Western cave,
Drives the huge billows from their heaving bed;
Tears from their grassy tombs the village dead,
And breaks the silent sabbath of the grave!
With shells and sea-weed mingled, on the shore
Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent wave;
But vain to them the winds and waters rave;
They hear the warring elements no more. (Sonnet 44, 3)

If we read the turbulent ocean in Smith's own terms as an image of her depression and inner torment then the breaking up of the church graves is significant. The energy described in the poem is anarchic in the force of its destruction and in its disrespect not only for the codes of religion but also for society, with the interior image of the poem pushing at the tight limits of the sonnet structure. I want to argue however, that the impulse is also more positively transgressive in political terms, since the sea has a socially levelling, or more accurately socially blurring effect. The social separations of class, gender, wealth, and the physical body which are maintained ritually in death through the separation and hierarchies of graves, are here all lost by the flood. The bodies mingle with nature, with 'shells and seaweed', but also in the confusion with each other.

That this functions in a political way, as socially transgressive, is made clearer in one of the few poems to appear in *Elegiac Sonnets* which does not adopt the sonnet form, but which repeats the anarchic tone and imagery of the previous sonnet. 'Elegy' brings together social questions of class and gender as it imagines a fictional group of people whose lives are affected by the flood in Sonnet 44, a significance to which Smith draws our attention in a copious footnote, telling us that the father in the poem has a 'tomb erected to his memory in the church yard mentioned in Sonnet the 44th' (*Poems*, p. 80). This return to the site and incident of the flooding makes clear the importance of this moment for Smith in both a symbolic and literal way,

and the anarchic transgression enacted there now takes on a specific political significance as she zooms in on particular details. The flooding of the churchyard is described again in this poem, but here, a living woman is carried off into the waves, adding a complex and disturbing dimension to Smith's earlier vision. In case some crucial aspects of the poem's significance should be missed by the casual reader, Smith hammers home the social and political significance of the event in the footnote, which tells in prose the story so vividly imagined in the poem of the doomed love between an 'indigent young woman' and the 'son of a wealthy yeoman' (*Poems*, p. 80). The yeoman, resenting his son's attachment, implicitly on the basis of class differences, sets in motion the events which lead to tragedy. He sends his son away to work at sea, a banishment which leads to the son's death as he drowns trying to rescue another ship in distress during a storm. The father himself later dies and his body is buried in Middleton churchyard where it is marked by an impressive tombstone. The actual action of the poem takes place as the young woman visits the graveyard with a storm gathering and, 'courting the same death as had robbed her of her lover,...awaits its violence' (p. 80).

The power of the ocean which is figured so vividly in the sonnet seems to be here invoked by female desire; it is the woman's voice which speaks, describing and calling upon the storm:

"Dark gathering clouds involve the threatening skies,
The sea heaves conscious of the impending gloom,
Deep, hollow murmurs from the cliffs arise;
They come - the Spirits of the Tempest come!

Oh, may such terrors mark the approaching night
As reign'd on that these streaming eyes deplore!
Flash, ye red fires of heaven! with fatal light,
And with conflicting winds, ye waters! roar.

Loud and more loud, ye foaming billows! burst;
Ye warring elements! more fiercely rave,
Till the wide waves o'erwhelm the spot accurst
Where ruthless Avarice finds a quiet grave!" (1)

The female speaker later describes herself as a 'living victim' (24) but her invocation of the destructive powers of the storm challenges the idea of passive female

victimisation, presenting her instead as demonic in her anger, with 'wild looks, and streaming hair' (13). The woman's presence in the poem functions banshee-like to solicit 'vengeance on the dust below' (20), a significance which is confirmed by the 'shrieks of horror' (14) which interrupt her speech. This vengeance is no mere symbolic act however, since through the power of the storm a very real act of revenge is performed, as the flood destroys the power relations which still exist posthumously between the yeoman and the peasants buried in the graveyard:

"Lo rising there above each humbler heap,
Yon cipher'd stones *his* name and wealth relate,
Who gave his son - remorseless - to the deep,
While I, his living victim, curse my fate.

Oh! my lost love! no tomb is placed for thee,
That may to stranger's eyes thy worth impart;
Thou hast no grave but in the stormy sea!
And no memorial but this breaking heart!" (21)

The power which the father wielded over the local peasantry and also over his son and the young woman, remains inscribed on the memorial tablet which functions to raise the father's status above the 'humbler heap[s]' even in death, while the son because of his transgression of class boundaries is exiled outside the hierarchies of power, dying nameless in the oblivion of the water.

This poem, like most of Smith's, is devoid of faith; faced with no options in life the woman 'Tr[ies] with a vain effort to submit to Heaven' (31) but finding this impossible instead channels her desires and anger into a more macabre Gothic alternative: to hold the mangled corpse of her lover's body once more and drown with him:

"Oh! might I fondly clasp him once again,
While o'er my head the infuriate billows pour,
Forget in death this agonizing pain,
And feel his father's cruelty no more!

Part, raging waters! part, and shew beneath,
In your dead caves, his pale and mangled form;
Now, while the Demons of Despair and Death
Ride on the blast, and urge the howling storm!" (33)

These twin Demons of Despair and Death are the woman's own, the incarnation of her own suffering, and as such the two are intrinsically entwined; she is figured as the 'victim of Despair' (15) and in the absence of any religious optimism the only option for her is Death. Thus the woman articulates the same stark suicidal despair which is the impetus behind many of Smith's semi-autobiographical sonnets, but here, in an overtly fictional context, the desire for death hinted at in those sonnets can be realised. She sees in a moment of heightened supernatural intensity, her lover 'rise the whitening waves above' (42) illumined 'by the lightning's momentary blaze' (41). But the vision remains grounded in grim physical reality; His 'phantom' (53) is not a perfect spiritual replica of the lover she knew but 'dead, disfigured' (49). A still harsher return to reality awaits the woman as the vision itself dissolves as chimera:

"Ah! wild Illusion, born of frantic Pain!
He hears not, comes not from his watery bed!
My tears, my anguish, my despair are vain,
The insatiate ocean gives not up its dead." (57)

The realisation that the vision is merely an illusion carries with it the dawning awareness that her dream of returning to the lover's embrace in death is, like their attempted transgression of class-boundaries, a romantic fantasy that will not be realised.

With even that final grim hope erased, all that remains is the desire for death itself in its stark form without religious or romantic consolation, as forgetfulness and oblivion. This is the same desire that haunts Smith's autobiographical poetry, where this sense of hopelessness in the lack of alternatives available for the suffering woman is again shown to clearly be a consequence of social and political oppression. The final words that the woman speaks in the poem as she beckons and contemplates her impending death, function, within the context of the story, as a powerful critique of class and gender relations:

"'Tis not his voice! Hark! the deep thunders roll!
Upheaves the ground; the rocky barriers fail!

Approach, ye horrors that delight my soul!
Despair, and Death, and Desolation, hail!" (61)

While these are the last words spoken by the woman they are not the final lines of the poem. Smith adds another stanza to conclude which, while reaffirming the hopelessness of the woman's plight, does also confirm the transgressive power of a storm which is ruled by female desire and anger:

The Ocean hears - The embodied waters come -
Rise o'er the land, and with resistless sweep
Tear from its base the proud aggressor's tomb,
And bear the injured to eternal sleep. (65)

The ocean functions here not just as a source of oblivion for the woman, but as a politically transgressive force which blurs power and gender relations, breaking down the inscribed hierarchies of wealth and class, and even the physical separation between gendered bodies. That a woman is figured as committing suicide in the poem offers a damning observation of the real lack of options available to eighteenth century women; Smith is more pessimistic and radical in her vision of women's plight than her contemporary Wollstonecraft, since although her vision of the transgressive potential of the ocean is not imagined as a political reality, the elemental destructiveness of this vision suggests that no socio-political changes would ever allow women to fully escape from patriarchy or the lower-classes from the tyranny of those who wield financial power. Her vision of the ocean flooding the land does not function to evade politics but to suggest that the transformation required is fundamental, anarchic, almost apocalyptic, and would be ruled by female desire and anger.

Appropriating the Sublime: An 'Experience of Empowerment'

Smith's use of ocean and storm imagery is grounded in the discourses of the period, and evokes Burke's category of the sublime. Burke writes that nothing can ever 'fill the mind with anything so great' as the ocean, since it is 'an object of no small terror' and 'terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime'.²¹ The sublime, as many critics have noted, is a term which is gendered masculine and as such the concentrated use of it we find in Smith's

sonnets is important. It is from the outset the sublime rather than the beautiful which is focused on by Smith, a fact ignored by her contemporaries who read her sonnets in typically feminine terms and as such emphasise the effect of the beautiful.²² My analysis will look at the ways in which Smith revises, undercuts and appropriates the power of the sublime, using it subversively for her own empowerment.

While the sublime clearly predominates in the sonnets rather than the beautiful, these, somewhat unsurprisingly, exhibit a complex relationship towards the sublime itself. Smith's use of this concept adds another dimension to Anne K. Mellor's analysis of how women writers responded to 'the engendering of the sublime as a masculinized experience of empowerment'.²³ Although Mellor analyses in some depth the sublime as it was defined by Burke and Kant, and then by Wordsworth and Coleridge, she only looks at one poetic text by a woman, *To James Forbes, Esq., on His bringing me flowers from Vaucluse, and which he had preserved by means of an ingenious process in their original beauty* by Helen Maria Williams, a poem which does not in fact draw upon the conventions of the sublime at all and relies instead on the discourse of the beautiful. Much of Smith's poetry precedes the constructions of the sublime put forward by Wordsworth and Kant, but she does respond to and engage with the discourse of the sublime in her poetry as detailed by Burke. Burke grounds the idea of the sublime in the fear of the annihilation of self, and while this was a crucial factor in Barbauld's rejection of that concept it is, as we shall see, central to Smith's fascination with the sublime. Although the sublime was constructed as masculine, a number of its defining characteristics and attributes must have drawn Smith to it precisely because of her life as a woman in the eighteenth century. As well as the sense of self-annihilation which it engenders for the male theorists, the pain and terror suggested by the sublime reflects, unlike the beautiful, the horror of Smith's own life, and the importance of obscurity in sublime imagery functions like the ocean itself in allowing boundaries to be imaginatively blurred and transgressed.

Despite the links between Smith's poetic agenda and what the sublime offers, the masculine construction of that concept remains problematic for Smith, since the sublime also functions as a masculine power and thus symbolises the cause of her

suffering; Burke writes that that which produces the delight of the sublime: 'strength, violence, pain and terror, are ideas that rush in upon the mind together' (Burke, p. 60) and for Smith these are all features which must connect that aesthetic concept with her experience of life with men. Because of this basic tension which the sublime generates in Smith, between a desire for its effects and the recognition that it re-enacts male power, subtle changes are made by her in her use of the sublime. Smith's relationship with the sublime as exhibited through her sonnets bears a marked similarity to her relationship with melancholic sensibility, since as with that discourse there are crucial differences between Smith's responses and those which can be viewed as merely conventional.

Smith's scenery, with its emphasis on natural terrors: floods, thundering waves, night tempests and so on, falls squarely within Burke's schema of the sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*. (Burke, p. 36)

Burke goes on to suggest that the experience given rise to when encountering such sublime scenery, is that of pain or terror converted into an intense delight which is more exquisite than mere pleasure. As with the pleasures derived from melancholy, however, for this to happen there has to be an essential artificiality in the experience, in that the pain must not be too authentic; if the danger becomes too real then the terror cannot be converted into delight in this way. Burke writes that '[w]hen danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful' (Burke, pp. 36-7). In Smith's sonnets, terror, while vividly depicted, is subsumed by a very real pain, and there is no visible conversion of pain into delight. The reaction to the scenery is one of lingering distress, suggesting that Smith's use of the sublime is something other than a stock representation of the period.

The effects of the sublime in Smith's sonnets are in this respect very different to those in her novels which conform much more closely to the conventional

emotional responses generated by such scenery. In a study of Smith's novels, Carroll Lee Fry suggests that Smith 'frequently relies on the specialised language' of essays on the sublime and beautiful which had 'almost become jargon by the early 1800's', and cites one example of Smith's use of the conventions of the sublime, a moment from *Emmeline* in which the eponymous heroine 'enjoys "even amid the heavy gloom of an impending storm, the magnificent spectacle afforded by the sea" because "its grandeur gratified her taste for the sublime"'.²⁴ Here Smith does depict her heroine's experience of the sublime as that of enjoyment and this serves as a contrast to the way this experience is treated in her poetry. In the sonnets the same sublime image appears frequently but without the conventional effect. In Sonnet 52 for example, a lonely pilgrim is to be found 'on the eve of bleak December's night' (2) wandering 'alone, along the giddy height/Of these steep cliffs' (4) from where he views a storm:

....as the sun's last ray
Fades in the west, [he] sees, from the rocky verge,
Dark tempest scowling o'er the shortened day,
And hears, with ear appall'd, the impetuous surge
Beneath him thunder! (5)

Smith uses this scene however, not to describe an emotional response engendered in the pilgrim by the storm, but allegorically as a projected image of her own misery:

....So, with heart oppress'd,
Alone, reluctant, desolate, and slow,
By Friendship's cheering radiance *now* unblest,
Along Life's rudest path I seem to go. (9)

There is no terror registered in the scene and consequentially no delight, the sublime functions only as a fitting emblem of immense misery and boundless anguish. The internal misery which the scene represents in fact not only ignores but undercuts the expectations of sublime terror. The adverbs are downbeat: 'reluctant', 'desolate', 'slow', suggesting not terror but relentless, grinding, unremitting unhappiness.

It is female sorrow that undercuts the masculine power of the sublime in this sonnet, in what may be seen as an attempt to negate that power while at the same

time to appropriate and control its symbolism for her own ends. In another sonnet a similar scene of 'deep-embattled cloud' (Sonnet 59, 3) and 'Terrific thunders' (4) is set up as an emblem of a politically troubled Europe. This is suggested by Smith's dating of the sonnet in the title as having been written in 1791, which deliberately places the imagery in a historical context but also situates the scene in gendered terms as a masculine zone of war:

What awful pageants crowd the evening sky!
The low horizon gathering vapours shroud;
Sudden, from many a deep-embattled cloud
Terrific thunders burst and lightnings fly[.] (1)

No emotional response is registered in the poem to this drama and the terror of the scene is undermined by the presence of a feminine figure, the moon which remains strong and visible, a source of peace, throughout:

While in serenest azure, beaming high,
Night's regent, of her calm pavilion proud,
Gilds the dark shadows that beneath her lie,
Unvex'd by all the conflicts fierce and loud. (5)

Again this scene is used allegorically by Smith, the storm here representing 'Contention' (12) and the 'tumult of the troubled earth' (14), and the moon functioning more ambiguously as a 'spirit conscious of superior worth' (10). Typically, it is the feminine representative, the moon, which symbolises peace. Smith also however, seems to be granting the female presence a more untypical significance; the female figure of the moon is strangely powerful, her light undermining the sublime storms power by negating its potential for inducing terror, by 'Gild[ing] the dark shadows' (7) and by remaining 'proud' (6) and 'Unvex'd' throughout the 'conflicts' (8). The very ambiguousness of the 'spirit' which this powerful female personification represents is significant. If the storm's opposite set of imagery is masculinised both in terms of the sublime but also in its allegorical meaning of warring factions in Europe, then what the moon represents, the 'spirit conscious of superior worth', could be read as a woman, perhaps Smith herself. Although Smith could never make such a point openly, it seems likely that she considered herself and her female friends superior to men intellectually and morally,

since the men she encountered were not only violent and oppressive in their wielding of power, but wholly inadequate in their roles as husbands, fathers, and legal advisors.²⁵

What men have and what Smith lacks is power, and it is in the sublime that she finds the symbolic representation of this power which she wants to undermine but also to appropriate for herself. She repeatedly harnesses the sublime power of storms and oceans to enact her own desires. As I discussed in my earlier reading of 'Elegy' it is a woman's desire and anger which invokes the destructive force of the ocean, and in Sonnet 44 its sister poem, in which the ocean is depicted as 'sublimely' riding over the land, this power is shown to be primordially controlled by the feminised personification of the moon:

Press'd by the Moon, mute arbitress of tides,
While the loud equinox its power combines,
The sea no more its swelling surge confines,
But o'er the shrinking land sublimely rides. (1)

The moon seems to be more than just conventionally feminised here since it is described as 'mute', and thus stands suggestively for the silenced women of the eighteenth century. Unlike these real women however, the moon and the fictional woman are empowered, and control the sublime power of the ocean through which Smith is able to act out her fantasies. While then the ocean itself is figured as masculine in Smith's sonnets (see Sonnet 66), and while the sublime itself represents a masculine power, Smith usurps that power and enacts through its forces her own transgressive and anarchic desires.

The blurring of boundaries which these dark stormy oceans bring about is linked to that other important feature of the sublime for Smith, the sense of self-annihilation. This feeling is, however, according to Burke, given rise to by the terror induced by the vastness or immensity of sublime scenes. As we have seen in Smith's sonnets this terror is negated and yet the poems repeatedly seem to move towards a kind of self-annihilation in their desire for forgetfulness or oblivion. It is for Burke the threat of self-annihilation which induces terror, but in Smith's sonnets this function of the sublime is subverted since she is not afraid of self-annihilation, rather she

desires it. Consequently, although this oblivion is desired by Smith, because it is not a source of fear to her the sublime landscapes fail to induce it. Looking at the River Arun mingling with the boundless mass of the sea, she asks,

Can you one kind Lethean cup bestow,
To drink a long oblivion to my care?
Ah! no! - when all, e'en Hope's last ray is gone,
There's no oblivion - but in death alone. (Sonnet 5, 11)

With the sense of oblivion not granted her imaginatively, Smith turns to a more literal kind of oblivion: death. A longing for death haunts these sonnets in its stark suicidal form, stripped of all religious symbolism. As the ultimate sublime concept, what Burke terms 'the king of terrors' (Burke, p. 36), death offers the self-annihilation which the sublime landscape has failed to produce. Smith's particular obsession is death by drowning which recurs in countless poems and, as I have suggested, such a death can be seen as a desire for a very physical and total kind of self-annihilation, with not just the mind extinguished but all the markings of the body: social, ideological, and physical, being lost.

This near-suicidal desire for death which pervades Smith's sonnets, may be read in purely negative terms as an impulse towards closure without future hope, a mood suggested by Smith's use of the concluding couplet at the end of the sonnets, which emphasises the finality of her hopelessness. If however, we turn to the figuring of the state of death within the poems there is a possibility of a more positive reading of this desire, as challenging both Burke's sublime construction of death and conventional religious mythology. Smith's sonnets refuse to accept the promise of a Christian afterlife as a recompense for daily misery, a refusal for which Smith was criticised. They are in the terms of Deborah Kennedy 'shorn of religious consolation' (Kennedy, p. 47), and as such decline to be comforted by the myths through which eighteenth, and nineteenth century Western society justified and perpetuated the sufferings of women and the poor. The death she desires is at least a choice which rejects any further submission to patriarchal power. Moreover, the notion of a quiet, passive retreat into closure or the self-annihilation figured by Burke is thwarted by the energy of the poems themselves. Smith's desire for the 'gloomy rest' of the dead in Sonnet 44 is subverted and the phrase functions only

ironically since, as Stella Brooks suggests in an essay on the sonnets, ‘the preceding violation of the “silent sabbath” of the graves, the shock of the “village dead” being “torn” from their tombs by the “huge billows”, the “raving” of the “winds and waters” have suggested anything but the claimed oblivion; the graves have been disturbed, there is no “gloomy rest” for their inmates’.²⁶

In this vision of death Smith seems also to be rewriting Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’. While Smith uses death in a similar way to Gray, as a social leveller, negating the power of the great, she resists the closure and finality of the state of death depicted in that earlier poem. While Gray figures death in terms of containment, with ‘Each in his narrow cell for ever laid’ (15), Smith imagines a release from the confines of the tomb, as bodies are ripped from the graves and mingle together.²⁷ Smith’s vision of death works in an altogether more socially levelling way than does Gray’s vision, in which the hierarchies of the graveyard are maintained. The tension in Smith’s poem between her desire for the ‘gloomy rest’ of the dead and her figuring of death as unrest, seems to have disturbed Wordsworth who pencilled in a change to the last lines in his copy of the sonnets, so that the poem ends more logically.²⁸ What the poem as Smith wrote it in fact suggests, is that she experiences a conflict between her weary desire to retreat quietly into oblivion, and the force of her suppressed anger which is too strong to allow that to happen. Far from depicting death as a state of tranquil peace, Smith allows her volatile and repressed feelings to emerge in a strange Gothic fantasy.

The rejection of Burke and eighteenth century religion in Smith’s vision of death is served not only by the Gothic, but also by other imaginings, which describe a female alternative to the patriarchal heaven and which subtly undermine the figuring of death in terms of the masculinised sublime. As I have suggested, Smith’s primary desire for death is expressed as drowning and Moi suggests that ‘water....reflects the comforting security of the mother’s womb’, and functions as a space in which the woman is imaginatively ‘free to move from one subject position to another, or to merge oceanically with the world’ (Moi, p. 117). As such Smith’s desire to return to this space through drowning suggests a craving to return to a pre-Oedipal moment in which the self, in particular the gendered self, loses its boundaries. In Sonnet 90

Smith feminises oblivion itself as the 'Sister of Chaos and eternal Night' (5) and thus belonging to an unformed, pre-creation moment, before patriarchal order sets in. She asks for 'consciousness' to 'decay' (3) in a fantasy which again hints at a pre-Oedipal return to the dreams and chaos of the subconscious rather than to a state of self-annihilation. In Sonnet 4 she gazes at the moon, the 'Queen of the silver bow' (1) and imagines an alternative female heaven which reads like a return to a pre-Christian pagan moment in which women are mythologically powerful, or a psychoanalytic fantasy of a return to the mother. Traditional phrases are subverted, Smith is indeed 'Released by death' but not to a Christian after life, rather into an alternative 'benignant sphere' (10). Her fantasy is strangely termed: 'oft I think - fair planet of the night,/That in thy orb, the wretched may have rest' (7). The use of the phrase '*in thy orb*' [my emphasis] and the term 'sphere', which as well as meaning realm also functions to reinforce the cyclical image of 'orb', could both be read as suggesting a desire for a return to the mother's womb. The implication of these images are that having lived a life under male oppression and power Smith is unwilling to commit herself to a vision of death and an afterlife which repeats that patriarchal structure. Instead her sonnets move towards a vision of a female space attained in death which looks beyond the choices offered her in eighteenth century religious and philosophical discourse. In her desire for death Smith is doing more than desiring blankness and an end to suffering, she is actively rejecting patriarchy in favour of a feminised alternative.

Notes

¹ [Anna Lætitia] Barbauld, 'Mrs. Charlotte Smith', in *The British Novelists; with an Essay and Prefaces Biographical and Critical*, ed. by [Anna Lætitia] Barbauld, 50 vols (London: Rivington, 1820), XXXVI, pp. i-viii (p. ii-iii).

² Richard Chenevix Trench, 'The History of the English Sonnet', in *The Sonnets of William Wordsworth with an Essay on the History of the English Sonnet* (London: Suttaby, 1884), pp. vii-xxxvi, (p. xxii and xxiii).

³ Although Coleridge used Smith and William Lisle Bowles as his models for sonnet writing in the introduction to his *Sonnets from Various Authors* (1796), when he came to write *Biographia Literaria* (1817) he acknowledged only Bowles as instrumental in developing the genre.

⁴ Bishop C. Hunt, 'Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 1 (1970), 85-103 (p. 87).

⁵ Stuart Curran, 'The I Altered', in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. by Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 185-207 (p. 200).

⁶ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 31.

⁷ Daniel Robinson, 'Reviving the Sonnet: Women Romantic Poets and the Sonnet Claim', *European Romantic Review*, 6:1 (1995), 98-127 (p. 99).

⁸ *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 3.

⁹ Dr. Johnson writes in his dictionary under the definition of the sonnet that it is 'not very suitable to the English language' (cited in Curran [1986], p. 29).

¹⁰ 'Elegiac Sonnets, and other Essays. By Charlotte Smith, of Bignor Park, in Sussex', *Monthly Review*, 71 (November 1784), 368-71 (p. 368).

¹¹ Cited in Florence Hiblish, *Charlotte Smith: Poet and Novelist* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1941), p. 241.

¹² Raymond Dexter Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press and London: Milford, Oxford University Press, 1922), pp. 487-8.

¹³ Deborah Kennedy, 'Thorns and Roses: the *Sonnets* of Charlotte Smith', *Women's Writing*, 2 (1995), 43-53 (p. 43).

¹⁴ J. M', 'Literary Notice of the Late Charlotte Smith', *The European Magazine*, 50 (November 1806), 339-41 (p. 340).

¹⁵ Quotation taken from *Poems*, ed. by Curran. All subsequent quotations from Smith's poetry are taken from this edition and first line numbers only given in parenthesis in the text.

¹⁶ Thomas Warton, 'The Pleasure's of Melancholy', *The English Poetry Full-Text Database* (Chadwyck-Healey).

¹⁷ Hannah More, 'Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle To the Hon. Mrs Boscawen', in *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

¹⁸ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 116 and p. 117.

¹⁹ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, 1 (1976), 875-93 (p. 889).

²⁰ Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem, Addressed to the Author of The Pursuits of Literature* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798), pp. 17-18.

²¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 53-4.

²² Sir Walter Scott, *The Lives of the Novelists* (London: Dent, [n.d.]), p. 327.

²³ Anne K. Mellor *Romanticism and Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 90.

²⁴ Carroll Lee Fry, *Charlotte Smith: Popular Novelist* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), p. 86 and p. 87.

²⁵ That Smith considered herself superior to the men in her life is suggested by Catherine Dorset in her memoir of her sister's life; Dorset observes that 'The consciousness of her own superiority, the mortifying conviction that she was subjected to one so infinitely her inferior, presented itself every day more forcibly to her mind, and she justly considered herself "as a pearl that had been basely thrown away"' ([Catherine] Dorset, 'Charlotte Smith', in *The Lives of the Novelists* by Sir Walter Scott [London: Dent, n.d], pp. 303-34 [p. 311]).

²⁶ Stella Brooks, 'The Sonnets of Charlotte Smith', *Critical Survey*, 4:1 (1992), 9-21 (p. 14).

²⁷ *The Poetical Works of Thomas Gray*, ed. by John Bradshaw (London: Bell, 1894).

²⁸ In Wordsworth's copy of the 5th edition of *Elegiac Sonnets* which is housed in Dove Cottage Library, Grasmere, a significant change is made to the last lines of the poem by Wordsworth in pencil. The word 'But' in line 13 is crossed out and replaced with 'In' and the words 'gaze with envy on their gloomy rest' in line 14 are crossed out and replaced with 'envy their insensible unrest'. Wordsworth also made some slight adjustments to the punctuation, so that poem as amended by him reads as follows:

Press'd by the Moon, mute arbitress of tides,
While the loud equinox its power combines,
The sea no more its swelling surge confines,
But o'er the shrinking land sublimely rides.
The wild blast, rising from the Western cave,
Drives the huge billows from their heaving bed;
Tears from their grassy tombs the village dead,
And breaks the silent sabbath of the grave!
With shells and sea-weed mingled, on the shore
Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent wave -
In vain to them the winds and waters rave -
They hear the warring elements no more:
While I am doom'd - by life's long storm oppress,

To envy their insensible unrest-**[.]**

These changes point to Wordsworth's refusal to acknowledge the possibilities raised by the text in terms of conflict, ambiguity or irony, as well as to his desire to impose a closure upon death which Smith leaves open.

The 1790s - 'Gallic Mania' and Social Problems

Radical Connections: 'A Hot-Bed of Disreputable Jacobins'

At the beginning of the 1790s, Smith moved to Brighton, and resided there during the early years of that revolutionary and turbulent decade. This combination of period and place, provides a radical context for the novels and poems produced by Smith during these years. Not only was the historical moment politically explosive, belonging as it does to the years when the revolution in France grew more violent and anti-French feeling ran high in British non-Liberal circles, but the geographical setting is also significant; Brighton was a resting place for many French exiles escaping from the terrors of France and it was also, according to Hiblish, a gathering ground for 'notorious' radicals.¹ Bishop Hunt in his seminal essay on Smith's poetry terms Brighton in these years, a 'hot-bed of disreputable Jacobins'.² That Smith was conspicuous in this group is suggested by the fact that Wordsworth visited her in Brighton in 1791, on his way to view the revolution in France for himself, in order to acquire letters of introduction to supporters of the revolution living in Paris. In a letter to his brother he records that 'Mrs Smith who was so good as to give me Letters for Paris furnished me with one for Miss [Helen Maria] Williams, an English Lady who resided here lately, but who was gone before I arrived'.³ Smith's sister, Catherine Dorset, confirms that Smith became closely involved with radicals during her residence in Brighton in her memoir, in which she claims that Smith 'formed acquaintances with some of the most violent advocates of the French Revolution, and unfortunately caught the contagion, though in direct opposition to the principles she had formerly professed, and to those of her family'.⁴

The context of the work produced by Smith in these years is then deeply radical in the coming together of dynamic historical moment and significant geographical location, and consequently this period saw the publication of her most overtly political novels and poetry. The radical work produced at this time, in this place has largely been ignored by critics with the exception of Smith's novel of 1792, *Desmond*,

which Dorset suggests was written during the 'paroxysm of political fever' that her residence in Brighton engendered and was 'greatly condemned, not only on account of its politics, but its immoral tendency' (Dorset, p. 322). The novel certainly engages heatedly with the revolution controversy and with its publication Smith claims the distinction of being 'the first to join in the intellectual discussion of the Revolution in France with a novel', according to the editors of a new edition of the text.⁵ *Desmond* is an extremely radical novel which not only expresses support for the revolution but defends some degree of bloodshed, formulates a critique of the arch Conservative Burke, engages with revolutionary thinkers like Voltaire and Paine, critiques the slave-trade, and exhibits women's legal and economic status as literally the property of men. The reaction to the novel was largely negative, not so much on the part of the reviewers, some of whom praised it, but on the part of Smith's friends and other 'proper' lady writers. Dorset writes that '[i]t lost her some friends, and furnished others with an excuse for withholding their interest in favour of her family, and brought a host of *literary ladies* in array against her, armed with all the malignity which envy could inspire!' (Dorset, p. 322).

Many of the topics broached by the novel are controversial enough in themselves, but they are given an added radicalism in being expressed by a woman, and with *Desmond* Smith also enters into a volatile debate that coincided with the revolutionary years as to 'whether or not women should write overtly about political matters'.⁶ Knowing the inflammatory content of her novel Smith formulates in its preface an intelligent defence of women's rights to become involved in politics:

But women it is said have no business with politics - Why not? - Have they no interest in the scenes that are acting around them, in which they have fathers, brothers, husbands, sons or friends engaged? - Even in the commonest course of female education, they are expected to have some knowledge of history; and yet, if they are to have no opinion of what *is* passing, it avails little that they should be informed of what *has passed*, in a world where they are subject to such mental degradation; where they are censured as affecting masculine knowledge if they happen to have any understanding; or despised as insignificant triflers if they have none.⁷

This passage illustrates the impossible position in which women found themselves in eighteenth century ideology. Smith's commentary on women's right to have an

opinion on political matters precludes and seems to anticipate Polwhele's attack on her as an 'unsex'd' woman - an onslaught which was almost entirely based on this novel - when she writes that women are 'censured as affecting masculine knowledge if they happen to have any understanding'.⁸ Failing to see anything political in Smith's poetry, Polwhele alludes to *Desmond* as the site of her transgression when he mourns 'why does she suffer her mind to be infected with the Gallic mania?' (Polwhele, p. 18). As my readings of Smith's sonnets show however, her poems were also filled with desires which Polwhele would find objectionable, and in the 1790s her poetry grows more overtly political still. In 'The Forest Boy', which I look at in the final section of this chapter, Smith's question, 'Have [women] no interest in the scenes that are acting around them, in which they have father's brothers, husbands, sons, or friends engaged?', is answered and the very real consequences for women of decisions made in the political sphere are made clear; women are shown to suffer the most from political decisions which are made without their consent.

Although *Desmond* was perceived by her contemporaries as the only deviation in an otherwise blameless literary career - a perception which in recent years has been translated as meaning the only really interesting text written by Smith - she in fact staked a claim to write politically in both her novels and in her poetry throughout the 1790s. In claiming not only women's rights to be involved in politics, but in consistently returning to the social and ideological plight of women, Smith takes her place alongside the key feminist writers of the period. Many critics have drawn attention to the fact that *Desmond* was published in the same year as Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and some have noted the way in which Smith's novel responds to the same set of gender debates as that feminist polemic; Todd and Blank suggest that in the parallels drawn in her novel between domestic tyranny within English marriages and political tyranny in France, Smith was 'one of the first to extend the concept of social equality to gender issues' (Todd and Blank, p. xxiii). Diana Bowstead argues more forcefully that Smith's comments on the heroine's situation in *Desmond* 'are as radically feminist in their implications as anything in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*', and Pat Elliott suggests that 'Wollstonecraft and Smith recognized a crucial link between the political and domestic spheres that

rendered women powerless because of institutionalized patriarchy'.⁹ This chapter will focus both on the little noted radicalism of Smith's poetry of this period, and on the feminist message which underpins that radicalism, as Smith makes suggestive links between the plight of social outcasts, political exiles and herself.

In recent years the slight raising of Smith's literary status has been mainly due to the revived critical interest in *Desmond* and is marked by a new and well annotated edition of the novel. What still remains little discussed however, are the poems which Smith produced at the same period as this revolutionary novel, during her residence in Brighton, which as I will show retain a marked interest in the political and reaffirm her claim as a woman to write politically. This period of three years, from 1791 to 1793 inclusive, is termed by Hiblish 'Mrs. Smith's French period, because of her manifest interest in French affairs and the French' (Hiblish, p. 151). This interest is recorded most obviously in *Desmond*, in Smith's translation of a number of poems from the French, and in her lengthy blank-verse poem *The Emigrants* which, while apparently turning away from the support of the revolution, continues to reaffirm the values of that revolution and displays a marked interest in French affairs. Also written in these years, however, are a number of social criticism poems which have their origins in the discourses and ideological conflicts which emerged out of the French Revolution. This chapter will examine firstly those social criticism poems and the issues they raise, followed by a reading of *The Emigrants* in its radical context and finally, will focus on the way in which questions of socio-political oppression and women's sufferings link up in poems written later in the 1790s in a critique of patriarchy.

Society's Outcasts: A Voice from the Margins

The shorter poems written by Smith during the early years of the 1790s are usually disregarded by critics and at first glance, they seem to lack something of the sophistication and complexity of the sonnets or longer blank verse poems. They are interesting and valuable however, in that they show Smith to be engaging with the key political discourses of this period and they help to further diminish perceptions of her as merely a writer of sentimental verse. It is true that a number of these poems retain the characteristic personal element we find in Smith's sonnets, but this

is here combined with a broader interest in social issues. While it has frequently been acknowledged that Smith's focus on nature and the inner life of the poet was a source of inspiration for Wordsworth, the extent to which she also affected his political vision has commanded less interest. A rare exception to this is Bishop Hunt's essay on the influence of Smith's poetry on Wordsworth, which tentatively suggests that Smith's smaller poems written at this time, together with her novels, in all likelihood 'had an influence on Wordsworth's political opinions; or, more precisely, on his notion of the relationship between political and sociological questions, and literature' (Hunt, p. 99). Hunt notes the similarities of subject matter and their treatment in poems like Smith's 'The Female Exile' and Wordsworth's 'The Female Vagrant', or Smith's 'The Dead Beggar' and Wordsworth's 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'. Quite radically Hunt claims that 'Charlotte Smith's example must have encouraged' Wordsworth to 'take up the burning issues of the day as proper subjects for serious verse' (Hunt, p. 100). Stuart Curran more recently offers a feminist take on this subject matter, suggesting that marginalised figures such as 'the aged, the idiots, the female vagrants, the exiled and alienated' which haunt the poetry of the 1790s, are 'the legitimate offspring' of the group he identifies as first generation women Romantic writers, and function as 'displacements of feminine consciousness, the victims of sensibility, mice in a trap'.¹⁰ Curran argues here for the psychological significance of these figures, but I want to suggest that in Smith's poetry they carry first and foremost a socio-political message which includes a subtle commentary on the plight of women in eighteenth century society.

As my main interest here is not to offer a comparative study of Smith's poetry with that of Wordsworth, it is sufficient to note that the evidence does suggest that the poems written by Smith at this time had a direct influence on Wordsworth's social outcast poems which were destined to outlive hers in fame. It may also be worth noting, however, because of the indication it gives of Smith's politics, a crucial difference in the positions from which the two poets write. Wordsworth takes up in poems of this nature very specific and distinguishable poetic personas. In some, as in 'The Female Vagrant', he attempts to veil his intrusion and allow the figures to speak for themselves in dramatic monologue. In others, such as 'The Old

Cumberland Beggar', he speaks omnisciently, in a spirit of superior benevolence calling for political change:

....Statesmen! ye
Who are so restless in your wisdom, ye
Who have a broom still ready in your hands
To rid the world of nuisances; ye proud,
Heart-swoln, while in your pride ye contemplate
Your talents, power, or wisdom, deem him not
A burthen of the earth! 'Tis Nature's law
That none, the meanest of created things,
Of forms created the most vile and brute,
The dullest or most noxious, should exist
Divorced from good[.] (67)¹¹

In contrast to these two very separate strategies, Smith speaks from a split position within each of her social criticism poems in a way that renders them extremely complex. Within all of these poems she does adopt at times a superior, benevolent voice, which must have influenced Wordsworth to voice his support for the outcasts of society in a similar manner, but cutting through Smith's tone of benevolence and problematising it, is the subtle connecting of her own position with that of the outcasts. As a woman born to landed gentry, but who had suffered at the hands of a patriarchal familial and societal system which had often left her in a state of near poverty, Smith inhabits both the position of the benevolent liberal thinker and simultaneously, that of the oppressed and marginalised figures she describes.

This juxtaposition emerges clearly in two poems written in November 1792: 'The Dead Beggar: An elegy, addressed to a lady, who was affected at seeing the funeral of a nameless pauper, buried at the expense of the parish, in the church-yard at Brighthelmstone, in November 1792' and 'The Female Exile: Written at Brighthelmstone in November 1792'. Smith's dating and placing of these poems is significant as it places them within a radical context even if the poems themselves display little of this radicalism openly. 'The Female Exile' was worked into the longer poem *The Emigrants* which was published the following year and which she must have been working on at this time, since its opening scene is described as 'a Morning in November, 1792'.¹² In singling out this female figure from a wider collection of French exiles Smith also chooses the character which parallels most

closely her own position. Like Smith's autobiographical poetic persona, this figure courts the stormy ocean scene:

November's chill blast on the rough beach is howling,
The surge breaks afar, and then foams to the shore,
Dark clouds o'er the sea gather heavy and scowling,
And the white cliffs re-echo the wild wintry roar. (1)¹³

Here the stark horror of the natural scene seems to reflect and be reflected by the suffering of the female watcher, in a manner which recalls the way in which Smith's anguish was embodied in such imagery. The female exile's distress is implicitly compared to Smith's, who in an earlier sonnet wrote that 'only beings as forlorn as I,/Court the chill horrors of the howling blast' (Sonnet 67, 3).

Other imagery in the poem connects this figure to Smith herself. The woman's hair, 'those fair flowing tresses' which now 'stream to wild winds' (13) were 'Once woven with garlands of gay Summer flowers' (14), recalling Smith's own memory, in a sonnet describing a happy childhood by the River Arun, 'where once' (Sonnet 5, 1) she writes 'I wove your blue-bells into garlands wild' (3). What connects the woman's plight to Smith's own most clearly however, is the absence of a male figure in the poem and the presence of a group of children who are 'unconscious of sorrow' (17). These words echo a personal moment in Sonnet 30 in which Smith is the mother figure watching 'yon little troop at play,/By Sorrow yet untouch'd, unhurt by Care' (1). The children in 'The Female Exile' do little to alleviate the woman's grief, particularly since the poem hints that they will in adulthood repeat the same mistakes and acts of violence which have led to their mother's present misery. They are playing with a toy ship 'with its ribbon-sail spreading' (21), launching it on the 'salt pool the tide left behind' (22). The activity seems to further aggravate their mother's peace of mind, since in it she foresees and dreads for them '[t]he multiplied miseries that wait on mankind' (24).

The female exile awaits news from France which may bring her hope, but such tidings are deferred and, like Smith, she is 'blighted by grief' (16). In these subtle connections which are made between the two female figures, and the description of a sorrow which is visibly caused by political oppression and the absence of male aid,

Smith seems to imply that this is a typical experience of women. The tyranny in France, which necessitates the woman's exile to England with children as dependants, is implicitly compared with the male legal, social, and familial tyranny which leaves Smith in an almost identical emotional, social, and financial condition.¹⁴ The final stanza of the poem reaffirms this link, while at the same time establishing Smith's distance from the figure by describing her previous potential for benevolent charity:

Poor mourner! - I would that my fortune had left me
The means to alleviate the woes I deplore;
But like thine my hard fate has of affluence bereft me,
I can warm the cold heart of the wretched no more! (33)

The complex positioning which Smith adopts in these social criticism poems is seen most clearly in these lines in which she vacillates between a position of social superiority and benevolence, to one of sharing the same 'hard fate' as the outcast.

It is clearly more socially acceptable for Smith to align her own position with this figure, a woman, and one who was possibly once well off, than with a labourer or with some of the poorer marginalised figures we find in Wordsworth's social criticism poems. In 'The Dead Beggar' however, Smith makes links through the imagery of the poem between herself and a man who lived and died in extreme poverty, and on the very margins of society. The beggar is described in terms in which we have become accustomed to Smith describing herself; he is a 'time-worn sufferer' (5) and his path has been like Smith's, 'sown with thorns' (22). Smith cannot mourn the death of the beggar as she cannot mourn the prospect of her own death. Instead she tells the lady to whom the poem is addressed:

Rather rejoice that here his sorrows cease,
Whom sickness, age, and poverty oppress'd;
Where Death, the Leveller, restores to peace
The wretch who living knew not where to rest. (13)

The sentiments expressed in this stanza are echoed in the very personal poem 'April', written on the death of Smith's daughter, which closes with the statement that far from resisting the 'decisive hand' (55) of death she will rather 'Rejoice to bid

a world like this adieu!' (56). Smith's desiring the release of death for the beggar in this way as she desires it for herself, functions to link the two fates.

'The Dead Beggar' may appear to be designed along the lines of a typical religious conciliatory poem written to comfort the 'lady' in the title, who is 'affected' at seeing the pauper's parish burial, but certain aspects of the poem would suggest a more interesting reading. The charity which is bestowed upon the pauper is distinguished from that which Smith wanted to offer in the previous poem, it is 'cold, reluctant, Parish Charity' (3) and the sufferings described by Smith of the pauper's life are too harsh for any religious consolation to be found. The poem does not in fact attempt to comfort the nameless 'lady' and could be read instead as an attack on that figure. The first lines of the poem position the lady as a follower of sensibility, suffering only the artificial pangs of sorrow:

Swells then thy feeling heart, and streams thine eye
O'er the deserted being, poor and old,
Whom cold, reluctant, Parish Charity
Consigns to mingle with his kindred mold? (1)

Since the Parish has reluctantly had to pay for the pauper's funeral, the lady's tears have clearly not offered more than a display of grief. The lines read as deeply sarcastic, drawing attention to the juxtaposition of the lady's artificial show of grief and the very real misery of the pauper, a 'deserted being, poor and old' who is in death treated with the same contempt as in life. That the lady's exhibition of grief is artificial is further suggested by the lines, 'What tho' no kindred croud in sable forth,/And sigh, or seem to sigh, around his bier' (9). The description of being clad in 'sable' and seeming to sigh may be intended to suggest the lady herself, as may 'Unfeeling Fortune' (23) which, while conventionally meaning fate, in this context seems to offer a subversive reading of the 'feeling' lady and her wealth, suggesting that sensibility with its streaming eye does little to alleviate real social problems and human suffering.

Death in this poem once more takes on a political dimension as a social 'Leveller' (15) where the power struggle between oppressor and oppressed can no longer

function. The penultimate stanza of the poem introduces other political implications which connect it to the radicalism of Smith's surroundings:

Rejoice, that tho' an outcast spurn'd by Fate,
Thro' penury's rugged path his race he ran;
In earth's cold bosom, equall'd with the great,
Death vindicates the insulted rights of Man. (17)

Again a transgression of boundaries and hierarchies is shown to take place, as in death the beggar is 'equall'd with the great' (19), implicitly perhaps the 'lady' of the title. The final line of this stanza however, gives Smith's vision of death a radical impetus as it 'vindicates the insulted rights of Man'. This would appear to be an overt reference to Paine's radical text *The Rights of Man*, which appeared between the years 1790 and 1792 in response to the questions of human rights generated by the French Revolution, and which was considered a revolutionary and dangerous work, with Paine himself having to escape to France to avoid prosecution. Smith's adoption of the phrase '*vindicates* the rights of Man' [my emphasis] however, would seem to also echo the title of Wollstonecraft's 1790 *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, a woman's take on the debate on the revolution in France. Although in that text the revolutionary questions are not yet explicitly gendered as they would be in Wollstonecraft's polemic published three years later, the involvement of women in the debate at this point is significant. In the imagery of the poem Smith connects her own plight to that of the beggar and thus makes a subtle appropriation of the phrase for women as well as men, in a gesture which precedes Wollstonecraft. Unlike Wollstonecraft however, Smith cannot envision radical social change. Her experience of male control and oppression is too absolute for her to imagine a realistic outlet. She desires for herself and for others who suffer at the hands of patriarchy only death as a subverter of hierarchies and as a means of escape from social oppression, a choice which Wollstonecraft herself opted for by twice attempting suicide.¹⁵ Smith's is a horrifying and bleak commentary, which stands besides that of Wollstonecraft on the issues of human rights and gender inequality, that challenged the eighteenth century status quo.

This poem, although seemingly inconsequential and generally ignored now by anthologisers and critics, was considered seditious when it appeared in 1792 in a

hostile and reactionary Britain. After its first publication subsequent editions contained a defensive footnote written by Smith in which she writes, in reference to her use of the revolutionary phrase ‘vindicates the insulted rights of Man’:

I have been told that I have incurred blame for having used in this short composition, terms that have become obnoxious to certain persons. Such remarks are hardly worth notice; and it is very little my ambition to obtain the suffrage of those who suffer party prejudice to influence their taste; or of those who desire that because they have themselves done it, every one else should be willing to sell their best birth-rights, the liberty of thought, and of expressing thought, for the *promise* of a mess of pottage. (*Poems*, p. 96)

Smith’s writing here is hardly conciliatory. While she implicitly claims to have no ‘party prejudice’, she continues to employ the discourse of human rights which positions her on the side of supporters of the revolution and for which she was being criticised, demanding ‘liberty of thought’ and expression. These claims have a double edge since she is not only defending human rights, but in writing this footnote implicitly claims that women should be included in that category.

Along with these two poems Smith published another which she identifies as having been written in the same month entitled, ‘Written for the benefit of a distressed player, detained at Brighthelmstone for debt, November 1792’. It is written in heroic couplets, which gives the poem a rapid, vivacious beat. The humour of the poem, combined with a biting social realism and sing-song rhythm may well have influenced Mary Robinson’s political satire poems: ‘London 1795’ and ‘London’s Summer Morning’. This humour also exhibits a side of Smith’s personality which those who knew her observed, but of which there is little evidence in her poetry.¹⁶ The ambivalence Smith feels between her position as a respectable and benevolent lady writer, writing ‘for the benefit of a distressed player’, and her sense of fellowship with that figure, echoes the links made in the previous two poems between Smith and the marginalised social outcasts. This ambivalence is expressed in this poem through the speaking voice which is not always clearly identifiable, sometimes sounding like an omniscient third person, and on other occasions like the dramatic persona of the player. This mingling of an authorial voice with the fictional

voice of the player, complicates the poem and enables Smith to move beyond a position of superior benevolence.

The title of the poem itself enacts this tension and problematises our reading of the poem. The hand behind the title is clearly that of Smith, and she tells us in her omniscient benevolent mode that the poem is 'Written for the benefit of a distressed player'. But the second part of the title immediately connects that figure to Smith herself since he is 'detained....for debt', a circumstance which Smith widely publicised herself as having to undergo alongside her husband. The first two stanzas of the poem sound as if they are spoken by Smith herself, as they exhibit her ornithological knowledge with descriptions of the migratory habits of the *Becca-fica* (4) and the *Wheat-eat* (5). I have already suggested that bird imagery is significant in women's poetry of the period and it functions here, as it often does, as a symbol of freedom and longing. Against the freedom of the migratory birds to 'quit' (2) in 'a thousand swarms....our English shore' (1), is set an image of one caught in a trap of 'bird-lime' (7) who is 'unplum'd' and 'confined' (7) - an 'ill-fated straggler' who must stay behind (8). This metaphor functions to establish the plight of the player who is imprisoned and also subtly to connect that figure to Smith, since it recalls her desire in Sonnet 3 'To sigh, and sing at liberty' like the Nightingale (14). After the links made in these first two stanzas between Smith and the speaking voice, it comes as something of a surprise when the pronoun 'we' appears in the next stanza, identifying the speaking voice as that of the player: 'So we, the buskin and the sock who wear,/And "strut and fret," our little season here' (13). These lines suggest a double significance of both an actor on the stage and a player in life with its tragedies, represented by the 'buskin', and its comedies, represented by the 'sock'.¹⁷ The poem reaches towards the idea, common to us now with the metafictional devices of postmodernism, that the boundaries between art and fiction are blurred. Reminding us again of Smith, in whose novels and poetry the real and the fictional are conflated, is the description of the actor who finds himself 'Mingling - with real distresses - mimic pains' (28).

The poem follows a theatrical theme, and cleverly uses quotations and images from well known texts to offer an ironic perspective on social conditions in the eighteenth

century. This is another strategy which Wordsworth may have picked up from reading Smith since, as Hunt notes, both draw 'directly from Shakespeare for the rhetoric of political and social criticism' (Hunt, p. 97). Among the impoverished players is a 'pale, lank Falstaff' (29) who 'Much needs....stuffing' (30), and there is an accurate yet humorous take on gender relations:

Here shivering Edgar, in his blanket roll'd,
Exclaims - with much too reason, 'Tom's a-cold!'
And vainly tries his sorrows to divert,
While *Goneril* or *Regan* - wash his shirt! (34)

Women, even here, are depicted continuing with the practical domestic cares in the face of extreme poverty, while the male figure lies in bed offering no comfort or assistance. Other male figures however, offer more positive role models and 'Hotspur', taking on a domestic persona, while 'plucking "honour from the moon,"/Feeds a sick infant with a pewter spoon!' (40). Here, and in the image of a 'young Ammon' (30) reduced to rehearsing 'in a garret - ten feet square!' (31), male power is successfully negated through humour.

Smith continues this humorous vein in her description of the fishermen who draw 'like Glendower, spirits from the deep' (45) - a pun, which in case her readership misses it, is explained in a footnote. She cites a quotation from *1 Henry IV* and tells us that the 'spirits' as well as signifying the supernatural visitations called up in the play, have a second meaning here of the moonshine sunk in kegs by Sussex fishermen. For all the humour of this verse, there is also evidence of real social problems and Smith once again visibly turns to the sea as an image of hope, writing that 'More blest' is the 'Fisher, who undaunted braves/In his small bark, the impetuous winds and waves' (42). This projection of the fishermen's lives as a source of hope nevertheless refuses idealisation or cloying sentiment, through the social realism inherent in her reference to their illicit commerce in moonshine. Nor is the image of the peasant which she introduces next allowed to remain sentimental, when sentimentality is introduced it is forcibly undercut. She sets up an ideal rural bower of 'domestic bliss' (57) only to subvert it by the humour of the every day:

The orchard's blushing fruit, the garden's store,

The pendant hop, that mantles round the door,
Are his:- and while the cheerful faggots burn,
'His lisping children hail their sire's return!' (58)

The final line of this stanza also functions as another revisioning of Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', a reference which Smith makes sure is not lost on her audience by quoting Gray's original line in a footnote: 'No children run to lisp their sire's return' (*Poems*, p. 102).¹⁸ Here Gray's 'Elegy' is revised not by an excess of anger but through a humour which functions to challenge the image of nameless peasants as dead, and therefore safely contained and idealisable, with an individual who is very much alive and kicking. In rejecting Gray's closure Smith also once again rejects the sentimental and the melancholic tradition and undercuts it, this time not by the starkness of genuine suffering but by the humour of the quotidian.

Smith employs literary references in the poem, of which it is a dense collection, to formulate a subtle political and social commentary. The wandering players are described as ghost-like in that they wander like Hamlet's father 'unhousel'd' and 'unnaneal'd' (62) and so unable to find peace with God. Like ghosts these figures can function only on the margins of society perhaps threatening its order. The call for 'Compassion' (67) towards these 'wretched' (71) individuals at the end of the poem seems to be spoken directly by the player himself, since the pronoun used is 'my' (67), but the call for 'Benevolence' (68) and 'mercy' (69) subtly blurs this voice with that of the superior, charitable onlooker. Moreover, the poem has forged too many links between Smith's own position and that of the players for the speaking voice to be identified as simply that of the player. We are reminded constantly of Smith herself in the poem's imagery, of a woman who must seek a '*precarious bread*' (24) through writing novels and poetry which effectively blur autobiography with fiction, so that the poetic imagery could be replaced by a passage from one of Smith's own prefaces. The final plea for 'mercy' seems, in this context, to retain its usual personal dimension and to be written as much for the benefit of herself as the distressed player.

Revolutionary Politics: *The Emigrants*

During the same month in which she penned these social criticism poems, Smith began writing *The Emigrants*, the most significant poem of her French period and along with *Beachy Head*, of her entire poetical oeuvre. Like Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* it is a lengthy and sweeping poem which functions to counter perceptions of women poets of the period as merely writers of short, easily assimilable verse. It is a meditative poem in two books which is written in blank verse and which foreshadows Wordsworth's lengthier introspective poems. *The Emigrants* also stands apart from the latter however, in its repeated refusals to abandon the socio-political world by retreating into memory or contemplation of nature. Like Barbauld, Smith rejects rural consolations in the face of momentous political events:

What is the promise of the infant year,
The lively verdure, or the bursting blooms,
To those, who shrink from horrors such as War....?

....

What is the promise of the infant year
To those, who....
Survey, in neighbouring countries, scenes that make
The sick heart shudder; and the Man, who thinks,
Blush for his species? (II, 43; 62)

Smith constantly returns to the revolution in France throughout the poem, but despite this, contemporary critics did not pick up on the radicalism of the poem's message, and focus instead on criticisms of form as well as Smith's habit of interweaving private details with public events.

These dual criticisms are formulated by several of the reviews, and the first of these, the questioning of Smith's ability to write epic blank verse poetry, is deeply gendered. The *European Magazine* claims that the form 'fatigues by its monotony, unless relieved by the variety and dignity of the Epic Muse' and the *Critical Review* observes that '[b]lank verse requires a fuller cadence and a larger sweep of harmony, than the confined and elegant sonnet'.¹⁹ These criticisms imply that Smith as a woman writer is advised to stick to the 'confined' form of the sonnet and not to stretch her powers to genres which require 'fuller' ability and 'larger' sweeps. The

second line of criticism taken by reviewers is that Smith's personal problems dominate the poem. The *Analytical Review* depicts the poem as a catalogue of 'domestic trouble' and the *European Magazine* writes sarcastically that 'we do not think it is the proper measure in which to complain - at least to do nothing but complain' (*European Magazine*, p. 42), entirely missing the political commentary which runs through the two books.²⁰ Both of the criticisms levelled at the poem are unfounded; Smith's use of blank verse is effective and although she does interweave the personal and the political here as elsewhere, what is most noticeable about this poem is the way in which she constantly drags herself away from her own sorrows to contemplate the enormity of the events taking place in France. It is true that the emigrants of the title are not the poem's main subject matter and function only as a touchstone for other topics, but these span out into issues of political oppression, the misuse of power, and the French Revolution.

Smith herself sets the poem up in political terms in a preface which takes the form of a letter to Cowper, her patron. Although the beginning of this preface plays along with gender expectations, with Smith describing herself as a 'feeble' and 'feminine' poet, she goes on to use the arena as a site of political discussion, addressing the hatred that exists between Britain and France, the French Exiles, and the September massacres (*Poems*, p. 132). The latter she spends only a little time dwelling on here and barely touches on at all in the poem, which is surprising since they occurred only two months before she began to write Book One and dominated most literary discussions of the revolution at this time. Smith is only in fact concerned with the massacres in terms of their consequences, the turning away of even Liberal support from revolutionary aims and increasingly reactionary government policies: 'the very name of Liberty has not only lost the charm it used to have to British ears, but many, who have written, or spoken, in its defence, have been stigmatized as promoters of Anarchy, and enemies to the prosperity of their country' (*Poems*, p. 134). These lines function as an implicit critique of Cowper himself, a Liberal minded evangelical who initially supported the revolution but later turned away from it, writing in January 1793 to William Hayley of his changed views:

I will tell you what the French have done. They have made me weep for a king of France, which I never thought to do, and they have made me sick of the very name of liberty, which I never thought to be.²¹

This indirect attack on Cowper, whom she figures earlier in the preface as a 'genius' (*Poems*, p. 132), ironicizes the opening of the preface and along with the poem itself challenges Smith's self-projected image as a 'feeble' and 'feminine' writer.

Unlike Barbauld's *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, Smith's longer poems, *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head*, can not be broken down into sections of a clearly developing argument for the purposes of critical analysis. As I suggested in Chapter Five there is a labyrinthine logic which disrupts the notion of linear progression, as Smith inserts her own story in history. While this is a crucial aspect of Smith's work and carries its own political significance, with political tyranny being connected to the domestic oppression of women, I do not intend to follow the sinuous meditations of the poem by tracing the shifts between the personal and political in this way. Partly this is because I focused on this tendency in Smith's poetry in relation to the sonnets and social criticism poems, but also because this is the aspect of the poem which was overemphasised by contemporary critics to the detriment of the poems extremely radical political message. I therefore propose to divide my analysis between the two books, and to focus on the key political passages in the poem in relation to other contemporary political writings, and in order to suggest both the poem's inherent radicalism, and the gender politics underlying this radicalism. In doing so, I want to dispute the common critical assumption that in this poem Smith goes back on the radical opinions which she expressed in *Desmond*, an interpretation which leads critics to suggest that '[l]ike many early supporters of the French Revolution, she changed her view of French politics after Robespierre'.²²

Smith does not in fact follow this typical trajectory of Liberal writers of the period and her politics are much more complicated than this reading suggests. She first expresses her support for the revolution in 1792 and not therefore during the heady years of Liberal support, but at a time when a reaction against that revolution was already taking place. Moreover, Smith demonstrates through her interweaving of narratives of domestic oppression and political tyranny in *Desmond*, that she was not

merely carried along on a tidal wave of Liberal support for the revolution, but was intelligently linking different kinds of oppression and critiquing power abuse in all of its manifestations; what Smith reacts against in this novel and what she continues to react against in *The Emigrants* is oppression in whatever guise it comes. In focusing on the political passages of the poem, and situating these in relation to other contemporary political writings, I want to suggest that in her portrayal of the French clergy and her commentary on events in France, Smith retains a stealthy radicalism and continues surreptitiously to celebrate and support the original revolutionary aims.

The Emigrants needs to be contextualised not only within the revolution controversy, but also, more specifically, within a climate of widespread interest in the plight of the French emigrants. The *émigrés* were the subject of much contemporary fascination, Barbauld referred to them as 'very interesting people', and numbers of committees were set up throughout the country - often by women - to raise funds for the emigrants.²³ Charitable interest was mainly reserved for female emigrants and the clergy, and of these the French clergy generated the most interest. In 1793, the same year that Smith's poem was published, two tracts appeared by well-known women writers, Hannah More and Frances Burney, asking for charitable donations to aid the plight of this group. Smith's poem inserts itself within this humanitarian and charitable framework, but as I will show subverts the expectations of such literature. Comparison between the anti-revolutionary rhetoric of these pamphlets and *The Emigrants*, shows how Smith cleverly uses the humanitarian interest in these men to introduce a discussion on the causes and progress of the revolution.

Book One of *The Emigrants* opens with a careful and deliberate act of scene setting which places it in the same radical context as Smith's three social criticism poems, of Brighton, November 1792. Here the geographical location is identified in much more specific terms and carries a further significance; our narrator, a barely disguised Smith, is 'on the cliffs' at Brighton, a vantage point from which the poetic gaze looks outwards across the channel, reminding us of the physical divide which separates Britain from the scenes of carnage in France, and the emigrants from their exiled home. This position grants Smith an omniscience which she uses to

formulate a critique of 'Man, misguided Man' (32) and although in eighteenth century discourse 'man' does mean human, the crimes she lists make it clear that she intends to incriminate the male sex only, since in the male dominated society of the period, the 'proud oppression' of rulers and the 'legal crimes' of lawyers (35) could apply only to men. Although Smith here and repeatedly throughout the poem longs to 'abjure society' (42) and escape such tyranny in 'some lone Cottage, deep embower'd/In the green woods' (43), she rejects escapism and turns back to social and political ills.

Smith moves on to the *émigrés*, and figures them initially in typically sympathetic terms as a group 'Banish'd for ever and for conscience sake/From their distracted Country' (97). However, Smith's portrayal of these men is at odds with that offered by Burney and More, who inscribe their anti-revolutionary stance into their descriptions, depicting the emigrants as honourable representatives of virtue and heroism, not only in terms of their present plight but also of their past conduct; the clergy's refusal to take an oath to the republican council denouncing their religious beliefs, Burney terms, in her *Brief Reflections Relative to the Emigrant French Clergy*, a 'virtue we scarce thought mortal' and the men themselves she figures as heroes, 'incorruptible in purity'.²⁴ In her poem written on the tide of sympathy for these men however, Smith subverts expectations, depicting them not as heroes but as figures of reproach, in part responsible for the revolution. Of the members of varying ranks of religious hierarchy which she describes - monk, bishop, abbot and pastor - Smith is most critical of the Bishop who, as the highest in the Catholic hierarchy represented here, is therefore most culpable for the church's excessive wealth, and the role this played in causing the revolution:

Dwelling on all he lost - the Gothic dome,
That vied with splendid palaces; the beds
Of silk and down, the silver chalices,
Vestments with gold enwrought for blazing altars;
Where, amid clouds of incense, he held forth
To kneeling crowds the imaginary bones
Of Saints suppos'd, in pearl and gold enchas'd[.] (128)

In these descriptions of the Bishop's thoughts which revert to his lost life, Smith inscribes not sympathy, such as we find in More and Burney, but a marked criticism

of Catholic superstition and excessive wealth which exposes pre-revolution corruption. In using the unpopular Catholic church as the central locus of her criticism, Smith is able to disguise the main thrust of her writing, which is a critique of power abuse and a support of the original revolutionary aims. There is a more subtle and yet more radical critique however encoded in this criticism of the Catholic Church, since Smith also implies, through what Curran terms the 'ambiguity' of her 'prose' (Curran in *Poems*, p. 140), that the Church of England is guilty of the same abuses of power, when she suggests in her footnote that 'France is not the only country, where the splendour and indulgences of the higher, and the poverty and depression of the inferior Clergy, have proved alike injurious to the cause of Religion' (*Poems*, p. 140).

As well as focusing on the corruption and oppression of the *ancien régime*, Smith also returns to pre-revolutionary images of the oppressed masses, and while she does express some sympathy for the exiles' plight, writing that 'I mourn your sorrows; for I too have known/Involuntary exile' (155), the dominant note of sympathy here and elsewhere in the poem is subversively directed not towards the exiled clergy, but towards the poor and oppressed. The poem turns strategically from critical descriptions of the clergy to a 'bare-foot peasant' in France 'whose hard hands/Produc'd the nectar he could seldom taste' (172). This image of victimisation leads Smith to critique even the most sympathetic figure amongst the clergy, the rural pastor, for

....staying not to try
By temperate zeal to check his madd'ning flock,
Who, at the novel sound of Liberty
(Ah! most intoxicating sound to slaves!),
Start into licence[.] (191)

Smith refuses to revert to the image most frequently endorsed by this date in a reactionary Britain, of a hysterical bloodthirsty mob, and presents instead a pre-revolutionary and early-revolutionary image of the oppressed and suffering masses. This, combined with remembrances of pre-revolution corruption and power abuse, suggests Smith's continued commitment to the revolutionary cause.

The only exiled figure who elicits genuine sympathy in the poem untempered by any criticism is that of a solitary woman surrounded by her children, who recalls the woman in 'The Female Exile', and who in turn closely resembles Smith herself. As in the earlier poem the woman is surrounded by her children and is depicted looking out to sea. Here the connection between the woman's misery and the stormy ocean scene is made more explicit since she is depicted as at one with the setting, sitting mermaid-like on a 'seat with matted sea-weed strewn' (201) 'hollow'd' in the cliff 'by the wintry storm' (200), and where 'dark'ning waves' (230) foam around her. The children's game suggests even more clearly than in the earlier poem that they will be responsible for future bloodshed as

....in the pool,
Left by the salt wave on the yielding sands,
They launch the mimic navy [...] (208)

The ocean, the woman's distress, and the violent storm of revolution being enacted in France blur, suggesting that the woman's miseries, like Smith's, are not merely psychological but are generated in the socio-political sphere. The woman herself, although clearly an aristocrat, since her memories are of 'rooms of regal splendour; rich with gold' (223), is subtly absolved of guilt, as to her the crowds 'Paid *willing* homage' (224 [my emphasis]). The guilt for this suffering is displaced and several factors, including the mock militaristic activities and the absence of a supportive male figure, suggest that that guilt is male.

Confirming this gender bias is the introduction of a final French exile, a nobleman with military bearing, who combines the guilt of excessive wealth and power abuse of the French clergy with the guilt of male aggression:

....dejection deep
Checks, but conceals not quite, the martial air,
And that high consciousness of noble blood,
Which he has learn'd from infancy to think
Exalts him o'er the race of common men:
Nurs'd in the velvet lap of luxury,
And fed by adulation - could *he* learn,
That worth alone is true Nobility? (233)

There is an implicit comparison between this man, who will never accept the revolutionaries' demands for equality, and Smith herself, who has clearly taken on board the doctrines which influenced the revolution and continues to stand by them. She argues that '*the peasant*' (241) who displays characteristics of 'Reason, Valour, Liberty, and Virtue....is a Noble/Of Nature's own creation' (242). Smith identifies these lines as being borrowed from James Thomson and acknowledges in one of her revealing footnotes that they are 'among those sentiments which are now called (when used by living writers), not common place declamation, but sentiments of dangerous tendency' (*Poems*, p. 144). These lines reveal the highly reactionary mood of the period in which Smith was writing. Her insistence upon using 'sentiments of dangerous tendency' within this climate points to the inherent radicalism of her intentions. With the introduction of this man the sympathetic female figure is strategically placed between two problematic portrayals of emigrants: the male clergy and the male aristocrat. From Smith's descriptions it is clear that what separates them morally and in terms of guilt is not class but gender. This structuring, which effectively surrounds and contains the female exile, is suggestive of the way that in life women are contained by a circle of male power and functions not only to excuse women from political guilt in the revolution, but also to blame the woman's own suffering on the male figures who surround her. In terms of sorrows and oppression, even a rich woman's position in society is, the poem implies, closer to that of the oppressed masses than the male figures in power.

This gendered commentary seems to seep into Smith's discussion of the causes of the revolution in France which she argues rests at the feet of those, like the nobleman and the clergy, who abuse power and surround themselves with excessive wealth. She blames 'Despotism' (274) and 'abject Slavery' (276) on:

....the Men, whose ill acquir'd wealth
Was wrung from plunder'd myriads, by the means
Too often legaliz'd by power abus'd [...] (283)

This legalised abuse of power is enacted by 'Men' with a capital 'M', reminding us that political, legal and economic power rests with the male sex, and that both Smith and the female exile are victims along with the 'plunder'd myriads'. But here, along

with a gendered critique of oppression, Smith also offers a more direct political commentary on the causes of the revolution and she informs us in a footnote that she is referring specifically to the Financiers and the *Fermiers Généraux*; groups who, as one historian notes,

made their living from handling public funds, and the spectacular profits of this activity placed them among the king's richest subjects....They lived in ostentatious luxury, and the fact that this dazzling wealth came from public resources created the suspicion that it had been made at public expense.²⁵

French taxpayers considered these men 'public bloodsuckers' and to the ordinary people of Paris they were 'hated symbols of fiscal oppression and misapplication of the king's revenues' (Doyle, p. 41). Of this group Smith writes that:

In the present moment of clamour against all those who have spoken or written in favour of the first Revolution of France, the declaimers seem to have forgotten, that under the reign of a mild and easy tempered Monarch, in the most voluptuous Court in the world, the abuses by which men of this description were enriched, had arisen to such height, that their prodigality exhausted the immense resources of France: and, unable to supply the exigencies of Government, the Ministry were compelled to call Le Tiers Etat; a meeting that gave birth to the Revolution, which has since been so ruinously conducted. (*Poems*, p. 145)

Far from backing down from her position in *Desmond*, Smith reiterates the attack on the financiers which she introduced there and offers a pointed reminder of what caused the revolution in the first place.²⁶ This critique however, like Smith's attack on the Catholic church would have had resonances for her contemporary British readership, who had been subject since 1784 to Pitt's increasingly imaginative and unfair new taxes, which included levies on horses, hackney coaches, windows, bricks, hats, ribbons, and candles, and many of which caused public outcry, with the particularly hated tax on windows being condemned as 'oppressive and unjust'.²⁷ In the context of the particular historical moment and the fears that the revolution in France could be re-enacted on British soil, the implied defence of revolution in response to financial oppression and abusive taxation has radical and threatening implications for the British establishment.

Smith however, not content with these implied parallels, makes this link between the political regime in Britain and that of pre-revolutionary France even more overt when she turns to a group whom she terms the 'Pensioners/Of base corruption' (316), who 'feed on England's vitals' (316). The terms of description of this group remain cryptic throughout, probably because of the savagery of the criticism which she levies at them. She describes the group in unspecific but deeply critical terms, as 'pamper'd Parasites! whom Britons pay/For forging fetters for them' (330). There are however, certain subtle links between these descriptions and those of the French tax collectors, not least the suggestion that the oppressions they enact, like those of the Farmers General could lead to revolution:

Study a lesson that concerns ye much;
And, trembling, learn, that if oppress'd too long,
The raging multitude, to madness stung,
Will turn on their oppressors; and, no more
By sounding titles and parading forms
Bound like tame victims, will redress themselves!
Then swept away by the resistless torrent,
Not only all your pomp may disappear,
But, in the tempest lost, fair Order sink
Her decent head, and lawless Anarchy
O'erturn celestial Freedom's radiant throne; -
As now in Gallia[.] (332)

Smith's support here clearly remains with the 'oppress'd....multitude' whom she figures as 'victims', so that this warning to the British establishment also functions as a defence of revolutionary action. She is also however, attempting to bring reasoned argument to the left's cause and closes Book One with a call for compassion and calm in the face of mass hysteria and reactionary politics. She injects a not entirely convincing, given her earlier criticisms, note of sympathy for the 'ill-starr'd Exiles' (354), and critiquing the Gallaphobic atmosphere in Britain, calls for the people to forget 'every prejudice..../Which pride and ignorance teaches' (358). Her message at the end of Book One however, remains on the side of the revolution as she twists the patriotic discourse which clamoured for war with France by arguing that Britain may 'triumph' better through 'compassion' owning the sway of English hearts (361), claiming that 'acts of pure humanity' (368) far 'better justify the pride, that swells/In British bosoms' (378) than victory in a bloody war.

By April 1793, the date at which Book Two of *The Emigrants* opens, Smith's continued support of the republican cause had been further challenged and problematised by the increasing violence of the revolution. Book Two commences with a note of despair at the events in France which had occurred in the intervening months, and at the war which had broken out between Britain and France just two months earlier. She precedes the second book of the poem with an epigraph from Virgil's *Georgics*, lines which begin '[h]ere right has become wrong and wrong right, so much war spread across the world, so many aspects of evil', and which end '[u]ncaring Mars savages the whole world' (*Poems*, 149). These classical lines are recontextualised immediately with the dating of the poem. In January 1793 Louis XVI had been guillotined and the Reign of Terror began, events which led to a massive wave of anger and fear emanating in Britain from even the most Liberal of circles towards the revolutionaries, and a few weeks later war was declared between Britain and France. This worsening of the situation in Europe rather than the hoped for improvement leads Smith not as we might expect to a rejection of politics however, but to an even closer political analysis and in this book she focuses on the current events in France, moving away from a discussion of the emigrants' plight almost completely.

The natural setting of the opening lines functions ironically in relation to the political maelstrom of Europe. The winter of Book One has indeed turned into spring, but the hoped for political improvement which should have accompanied that re-birth has not taken place. As in Book One Smith briefly turns to a contemplation of this natural scene, but, sensing its incongruity, rejects it and turns instead to 'human follies' and 'human woes' (42), which are figured most emphatically in the 'headless corse' (54) of the king. Smith's discourse on the revolution is deeply divided; she continues to utilise radical terminology while expressing revulsion at the events being enacted in France:

....Mercy turns,
From spectacle so dire, her swol'n eyes;
And Liberty, with calm, unruffled brow
Magnanimous, as conscious of her strength
In Reason's panoply, scorns to distain

Her righteous cause with carnage, and resigns
To Fraud and Anarchy the infuriate crowd. (55)

This split discourse however, allows Smith to critique the recent events in France while at the same time distancing herself from the reactionary mood in Britain by continuing to defend an ideal vision of 'Liberty'.

In Smith's descriptions of the plight in France, we find echoes of Hannah More's tract in which she takes up the emigrant's cause, *Considerations on Religion and Public Education*. This tract was published on April 1 1793 and sold in high numbers. It would seem likely that with a poem in process on the subject Smith would have read the pamphlet, and the links between the two works suggest that Smith may have added a second book to her poem partly in response to this tract. Echoing More when she asks '[w]ho...that had a head to reason, or a heart to feel, did not glow with hope, that from the ruins of tyranny, and the rubbish of popery, a beautiful and finely framed edifice would in time have been constructed....?', Smith describes the destruction of the French hopes for the revolution as they watch:

....the Temple, which they fondly hop'd
Reason would raise to Liberty, destroy'd
By ruffian hands[.] (47).²⁸

In a reversal of the position adopted by More, who addresses those who still 'favour' the 'prevailing sentiments of the new republic' because they are caught up in 'this *ignis fatuus* of liberty and universal brotherhood, which the French are madly pursuing' (More, p. 12), Smith speaks to those who turned away from the cause of liberty. She describes perceptively the reactionary mood which had set in not just among conservative politicians but even in liberal circles:

....Lo! the suffering world,
Torn by the fearful conflict, shrinks, amaz'd,
From Freedom's name, usurp'd and misapplied,
And, cow'ring to the purple Tyrant's rod,
Deems *that* the lesser ill[.] (79)

Smith not only expresses her distance from such a standpoint, terming the reactionaries 'Deluded Men!' (83), but also argues against it. The terms in which she

constructs her argument are again similar to those used by Hannah More, while her argument itself is a direct reversal of More's. More writes that while '[p]ropy and despotism' have been responsible for the slaying of 'thousands', 'anarchy and atheism, the monsters who were about to succeed them, would soon slay their ten thousands' (More, p. 13). Smith in contrast, asks her readers, rather than cataloguing the 'thousands that have bled' (85) resisting liberty, to consider the 'black scroll, that tells of regal crimes/Committed to destroy' freedom (88) and calls on them to count the extensive sacrifice of 'victims, who have fallen/Beneath a single despot' (90).

Still refusing to place the blame at the foot of the masses who desired only freedom from oppression, even in the wake of the execution of the king, Smith seeks to blame instead individuals and political systems which allow power to be abused. She bitterly terms the crown, the symbol of that power, a 'Toy, for which/Such showers of blood have drench'd th'affrighted earth' (96). Smith does argue passionately against one of the more violent of the revolutionaries taking complete power, but this is not a reactionary stance, rather a critique of political strategies which seemed to represent a return to pre-revolution absolutism and tyrannical control:

But ne'er may Party Rage, perverse and blind,
And base Venality, prevail to raise
To public trust, a wretch, whose private vice
Makes even the wildest profligate recoil;
And who, with hireling ruffians leagu'd, has burst
The laws of Nature and Humanity! (118)²⁹

That such power is held and abused by men is suggested by Smith's portrayal of the plight of Queen Marie Antoinette, and the heir presumptive who both remained imprisoned at this time. She lingers over the Queen's sufferings and empathises with them: 'much I mourn thy sorrows, hapless Queen!' (154), viewing them as the sufferings of a mother:

....Ah! who knows,
From sad experience, more than I, to feel
For thy desponding spirit, as it sinks
Beneath procrastinated fears for those
More dear to thee than life! (169)

The Queen's plight is subtly connected to Smith's own, not just through their shared experience of imprisonment and the anxieties of motherhood, but also because of the 'strange vicissitude' (175) which reverses her position from the highest to the lowest. As with the female exile Smith seems to want to expunge the French Queen of guilt, arguing that her crimes were exaggerated for political reasons by 'the rage/Of Party' (161).

Smith turns from the Queen to other examples of domestic suffering, and in particular female suffering, caused by violent struggles for power in the political sphere. For the 'Widow's anguish and the Orphan's tears' (318), she specifically accuses the individuals who have political power; she blames 'evils such as these' (314) on the 'closet murderers, whom we style/Wise Politicians' (320), since by these men

....are the schemes prepar'd,
Which, to keep Europe's wavering balance even,
Depopulate her kingdoms, and consign
To tears and anguish half a bleeding world! (321)

Smith recognises that European foreign policy is dictated by the delicately balanced power relations in Europe and that wars, like the more violent of the crimes perpetrated by the revolutionaries, are entered into for individual political interests. Smith explicitly refers to all of Europe's politicians here, and given the recent outbreak of war between Britain and France, her anti-war rhetoric comes dangerously close to sedition.

That Smith views man as a corrupting force comes across in her rejection of conventional religion, 'regulated sanctity' (387) and the established church, the 'domes/Of human architecture' (390), towards the end of the poem which is fuelled by a desire to escape male power and the strictures which are imposed upon religion by man. The poem describes a purer form of religion which is shorn of such intervention. Smith takes her argument that man has distorted religion one step further and suggests that through this corrupted version of religion, the aims of the revolution themselves have been warped: 'Saint-like Piety/Misled by Superstition' (415) has turned the 'sacred flame/Of Liberty' (417) into a 'raging fire' (418). The

final lines of the poem function as a mock prayer to restrain the desire for power which has perverted the course of the revolution, but also to restate the initial aims of the revolutionary cause:

Restrain that rage for power, that bids a Man,
Himself a worm, desire unbounded rule
O'er beings like himself: Teach the hard hearts
Of rulers, that the poorest hind, who dies
For their unrighteous quarrels, in thy sight
Is equal to the imperious Lord, that leads
His disciplin'd destroyers to the field. -
May lovely Freedom, in her genuine charms,
Aided by stern but equal Justice, drive
From the ensanguin'd earth the hell-born fiends
Of Pride, Oppression, Avarice, and Revenge,
That ruin what thy mercy made so fair! (424)

This final passage shows Smith continuing to use the discourse of the early revolution and its ideal of 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. She speaks out against oppressive power, 'unbounded rule', inequality, and defends the cause of 'lovely Freedom'. By couching these radical principles in religious terms, Smith is able to import dangerous ideas into her text under the very nose of the censorious reviewers.

Far from going back on her earlier support of the revolution in *The Emigrants* as several critics have suggested, Smith in fact succeeds in using the poem as an arena for restating the original goals of the revolution, and the sentiments expressed in this poem - though cleverly concealed within a tide of humanitarian support for the emigrants - remain surprisingly radical.³⁰ Like most Liberals she was shocked by the violent turn which the revolution took in 1792, but she does not conform to the reactionary mood which set in after this date. Instead of turning her back on the revolution she tries to assess why it failed and to add a voice of reason to counter the hysterical tide of Gallaphobia sweeping through Britain. Quite accurately, she blames individual lust for power and political manoeuvring for the failure of a revolution which should have promised so much.

A 'Choice of Cures': Women's Options under Patriarchy

Less than four months after the publication of *The Emigrants*, the suffering of mothers and wives which war engenders and which this poem catalogues, struck home, as Smith received news of the injuries sustained by her son Charles at the siege of Dunkirk on September 6 1793, which led to the amputation of a leg and thus rendered him once more dependent on her for support. In a letter of this period she writes:

[M]y expenses are very considerably encreas'd by the return of my poor Charles, for whom I am under the necessity of keeping a ManServant; & Government has yet done nothing for him, nor has he any prospect at present, but of an Ensigns pay, on which he could not exist unless he lived with me.³¹

In response to this event and these circumstances Smith wrote a ballad entitled 'The Forest Boy', and in a footnote to the poem legitimates her political complaints by personalising them:

Late circumstances have given rise to many mournful histories like this, which may well be said to be founded in truth! - I, who have been so sad a sufferer in this miserable contest, may well *endeavour* to associate myself with those who apply what powers they have to deprecate the horrors of war. Gracious God! will mankind never be reasonable enough to understand that all the miseries which our condition subjects us to, are light in comparison of what we bring upon ourselves by indulging in the folly and wickedness of those who make nations destroy each other for *their* diversion, or to administer to *their* senseless ambition' (*Poems*, p. 111).

Set up in this way, the poem becomes an attempt to illustrate the extent of domestic misery caused by war, which serves to validate the argument expressed in the preface to *Desmond* regarding women's involvement in politics. The ballad form allows Smith to draw her materials from community life and she speaks for all the silent sufferers of political conflicts, in particular the women. Smith realises that she speaks from the margins of the political, since she is denied any official political voice, and thus may only 'endeavour to associate herself' with 'those who apply what powers they have to deprecate the horrors of war'. In this matter, as in most others in her life, she is powerless.

The poem, made up of some twenty-six stanzas, tells the story of 'Will of the Woodlands', the previous occupant of a 'cottage' (3) which now sits in 'ruins' (2). It is in this cottage that Will was 'nursed' (3) and 'beloved' (4), terms which are suggestive of the silent but haunting female presence about the house. The poem tells Will's almost parabolic story rapidly. The boy is left to take care of his widowed mother in an idyllic woodland setting where he is visited by his childhood sweetheart Phoebe. The early part of the story bears traces of Augustan nature poetry, with the emphasis not so much on real rural existence but on a classical ideal, with Phoebe nymph-like, her cheeks tinted like 'the buds of wild roses' (26), bringing Will 'wood-strawberries to finish his meal' (39). We are soon reminded by Smith however, that the poem is set not in a timeless allegorical moment, but in the 1790s, when no images of rural idylls can long be sustained. In the course of the tale Will goes to town for some supplies, accompanied symbolically by a 'tempest' which redoubles 'the gloom of the night' (69). In the town he is 'entrapp'd 'twixt persuasion and force' (91) into joining the militia, a phrase which suggests that Will himself is not entirely without blame in the matter.

As Will sets out on the boat for his military duties overseas however, 'ill-omens' (93) start to beset him and he is filled with 'remorse' (94) at the dawning realisation that he has left his mother without aid (a barely concealed reference to Smith herself). He is sustained initially by the idea that Phoebe will continue to comfort and care for his mother in his absence and that she will 'help her to dry up the vain fruitless tear' (109). This male confidence in the continuing devotion of mother and lover soon founders however, and it occurs to Will that Phoebe may choose not to remain pining and longing for him, and might instead marry another. This thought is 'too cruel' (113) for Will to contemplate and we are told that 'anguish soon sped/The dart of disease' (113). He dies, on 'the plague-tainted shore' (115) having never had chance to fight for his country. From these outlines we can see that the poem itself bears a striking similarity on a number of levels to Wordsworth's 'The Ruined Cottage' which was begun in 1797 - although not published until much later as part of Book One of *The Excursion* - and it may be that Wordsworth drew upon 'The Forest Boy' when writing his poem. There are also significant differences between the two poems however, which render Smith's social vision of the effects of war

much more far reaching in their implications, in particular the consequences for women.

Will's death is quickly, almost brusquely dealt with in the poem, and the attention turns away from him to linger on the sufferings of the women left behind, in particular Phoebe. The death of the mother in anguish is handled in a manner similar to the death of Margaret in 'The Ruined Cottage'; Will's mother has in death 'forgot' her 'sorrows' (120) and Margaret is figured as 'sleep[ing] in the calm earth' (512); although in Smith's poem the 'peace' (512) is not an imaginary 'sleeping' state imposed on the woman by a male narrator but a far less idealistic vision of oblivion in death as an end to tremendous suffering, such as Smith herself desired.³² Moreover, in Smith's poem, instead of closure being sought in a meditative return to tranquillity through the story of the woman's plight, we are left with a far more troubling excess of female suffering which remains uncontained at the end of the poem. The fate of Phoebe is left open, with disturbing implications; she wanders alone, suffering a 'pain' which 'no reason can heal' (124) and slips quietly into madness, spending her days weaving 'Reed garlands' (128) and fancying 'she hears/His light step in the half-withered leaves' (129).

The final stanza of the poem following Phoebe's harrowing Ophelia-like decline turns away from this intimate narrative of private suffering to address the politicians responsible, in a move identical to that deployed in *The Emigrants*:

Ah! such are the miseries to which ye give birth,
Ye cold statesmen! unknowing a scar;
Who from pictured saloon, or the bright sculptured hearth,
Disperse desolation and death thro' the earth,
When ye let loose the demons of war. (131)

The fact that Smith does not merely attack French international politics and militarism, but 'statesmen' in general, indicates that once again she implicates the British government in her censure. As in her previous attack in *The Emigrants* she moves from a story of domestic miseries and particularly an account of the sufferings of women, into an attack on the male politicians whom, she argues, are directly responsible for this suffering. Smith makes clear here, as in the earlier

poem, that her criticism is directed towards male power and thus she subtly comments on women's oppression within patriarchy. The delineation of the atrocities of war focuses ultimately not on the plight of the soldiers, who, Smith implies, are partly implicated in the overall guilt for deserting their female relatives. Rather she focuses on the women left behind, for whom the only alternatives are madness or death.

The alternatives available to the two women in this poem, of madness or death, are reiterated in other of Smith's poems, offering us a more complex socio-political critique. In a poem written for *The Young Philosopher*, 'To the Winds', she depicts similar scenes of female suffering and gives utterance to another dislocated and disturbing female voice. The female speaker in the poem is a character from the novel, Elizabeth Lisburne, whose unhappiness is caused by an unfaithful lover, Hillario, whose 'voice', she tells us, 'still murmurs fond desire....But not for me!' (34; 36). The words of love Elizabeth once heard from him are now termed a 'delusion' (39) and emotionally 'abandoned' she 'Roam[s] wildly on the rocky coast' (43) courting the same stormy scenes as Smith and the mourning female lover in 'Elegy'. The final lines of the poem echo the set of choices which Smith suggests in 'The Forest Boy' is available to women:

Pain so severe not long endures,
And I have still my choice of cures,
Madness or death. (54)

The madness/death alternative which Smith identifies as women's responses to their suffering functions in these poems as a feminist political criticism. By linking the fates of women abandoned by the consequences of war and faithless lovers, Smith formulates a critique of patriarchy, a system under which she suggests women are deprived of options and inhabit the same social position as the poor and oppressed.

Notes

¹ Florence Hiblish, *Charlotte Smith: Poet and Novelist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941), p. 144.

² Bishop Hunt, 'Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 1 (1970), 85-103 (p. 86).

³ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, rev. by Chester L. Shaver, 8 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), I, p. 69.

⁴ Mrs. Dorset, 'Charlotte Smith', in *The Lives of the Novelists*, by Sir Walter Scott (London: Dent, [n.d.]), pp. 303-34 (p. 322).

⁵ Janet Todd and Antje Blank, 'Introduction', in Charlotte Smith's *Desmond*, ed. by Janet Todd and Antje Blank (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), pp. xi-xxxix (p. xxiii).

⁶ Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction 1660-1800* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. 225.

⁷ Charlotte Smith, *Desmond*, ed. by Janet Todd and Antje Blank (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), p. 6.

⁸ Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798).

⁹ Diana Bowstead, 'Charlotte Smith's *Desmond*: The Epistolary Novel as Ideological Argument', in *Fetter'd or Free?: British Women Novelists, 1670-1815*, ed. by Mary Anne Schofield and Cecelia Macheski (Athens and London: Ohio University Press, 1986), pp. 237-63 (p. 258); Pat Elliott, 'Charlotte Smith's Feminism: A Study of *Emmeline* and *Desmond*', in *Living By the Pen: Early British Women Writers*, ed. by Dale Spender (New York and London: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1992), pp. 91-112 (p. 91).

¹⁰ Stuart Curran, 'Romantic Poetry: The I Altered', in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. by Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 185-207 (p. 202).

¹¹ *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson, rev. by Ernest de Selincourt (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

¹² *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 135.

¹³ Quotation taken from *Poems*, ed. by Curran. All subsequent quotations from Smith's poetry are taken from this edition and first line numbers only given in parenthesis in the text.

¹⁴ Similar readings have been made of *Desmond* which suggest that Smith is drawing parallels between political tyranny in France and domestic tyranny at home. Alison Conway suggests that 'the novel's placement of long political treatises supporting revolution alongside the domestic narrative effectively identifies wife-abuse as a political crime' (Alison Conway, 'Nationalism, Revolution, and the Female Body: Charlotte Smith's *Desmond*', *Women's Studies*, 24 [1995], 395-409 [p. 399]), and Todd and Blank argue that '[t]he domestic slavery Geraldine Verney is subjected to is explicitly equalled to the political tyranny suffered by the French nation under the *ancien régime*' (Todd and Blank, p. xxxiv).

¹⁵ On suicide as a political gesture particularly in relation to Wollstonecraft see Chapter Six, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and the Rights of Death', in *Gender, Art and Death* by Janet Todd (Oxford: Polity Press, 1993), pp. 102-19.

¹⁶ Smith's sister Catherine Dorset writes that 'Cheerfulness and gaiety were the natural characteristics of her mind' (Dorset, p. 324).

¹⁷ Stuart Curran in his notes to this poem writes that 'buskins were boots donned to give stature to actors in classical tragedy; socks were light shoes worn in classical comedies' (*Poems*, p. 97).

¹⁸ For an earlier example of Smith rewriting aspects of Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' see my reading of Sonnet 44 in Chapter Six.

¹⁹ 'The Emigrants. A Poem. In Two Books. By Charlotte Smith', *European Magazine*, 24 (July 1793), 41-5 (p. 42); 'The Emigrants, a Poem in Two Books. By Charlotte Smith', *Critical Review*, 9 (October 1793), 299-302 (p. 302).

²⁰ 'The Emigrants, a Poem, in Two Books. By Charlotte Smith', *Analytical Review*, 17 (September 17 1793), 91-3 (p. 91).

²¹ *The Correspondence of William Cowper*, ed. by Thomas Wright, 4 vols (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1969), IV, pp. 363-4.

²² Deborah Kennedy, 'Charlotte Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran: A Review', *The Wordswoth Circle*, 25:4 (1994), 259-60 (p. 260).

²³ *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by Lucy Aikin, 2 vols (London: Longman and others, 1825), II, (p. 88); In 1795 a committee was set up under the patronage of the Duchess of York for the relief of 'female emigrants who were ill or *en couches*' and so unable to fend for themselves. The committee was made up of women and was formed specifically to give aid to 'persons of the same sex and rank as ourselves' (Margery Weiner, *The French Exiles 1789-1815*, [Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1960], p. 103). Numerous campaigns were set up for the French Emigrant clergy, including one by Edmund Burke and one by Mrs. Frances Crewe, which led to tracts being written by Frances Burney and Hannah More. For further details see Claudia L. Johnson, 'Introduction', in *Considerations on Religion and Public Education by Hannah More and Brief Reflections Relative to the Emigrant French Clergy by Frances Burney*, 262 (Los Angeles: The Augustan Reprint Society, University of California, 1990), pp. iii-xi.

²⁴ Frances Burney, *Brief Reflections Relative to the Emigrant French Clergy*, ed. by Claudia L. Johnson, 262 (Los Angeles: The Augustan Reprint Society, University of California, 1990), p. 14 and p. 22.

²⁵ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 40-1.

²⁶ Lionel Desmond, the eponymous hero of the novel, asks in a letter whether the 'husbandman, whose labours were coldly and reluctantly performed before, when the *fermiers-general*, and the intendants of the provinces, devoured two-thirds of their labour, if they do not proceed more willingly and more prosperously to cultivate a soil from whence those locusts are driven by the breath of liberty?' (*Desmond*, ed. by Todd and Blank, p. 64).

²⁷ Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement: 1783-1867* (London: Longmans and others, 1959), pp. 118-9.

²⁸ Hannah More, *Considerations on Religion and Public Education*, ed. by Claudia L. Johnson, 262, (Los Angeles: The Augustan Reprint Society, University of California, 1990), p. 13.

²⁹ Smith is probably referring to Jean-Paul Marat here, a man who frequently endorsed riot and massacre - indeed whose name was associated with the September massacres - and who called for a dictatorship in France. Ironically, he was assassinated three months after this poem was written by Charlotte Corday, a member of the most moderate of the revolutionary parties, the Girondists, which had been quashed by Marat. She murdered him in his bath shortly after he demanded 200,000 executions. Corday performs the ultimate political gesture, but Smith too publicly condemns the politics of a man who waded to power 'thro' a stream of kindred blood' (*The Emigrants*, II, 126).

³⁰ Roger Lonsdale for example notes that 'The *Emigrants*...acknowledges the growing hostility to supporters of the Revolution, and marks a reluctant change of her views' (Roger Lonsdale, in *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, ed. by Roger Lonsdale [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], p. 367), and Todd and Blank argue that in *The*

Emigrants Smith 'picked up the theme pivotal to reaction propaganda - the Jacobin government's savage persecution of its own citizens' (Todd and Blank, p. xxi).

³¹ Cited in 'Charlotte Smith to Thomas Cadell: A New Letter', *Modern Philology*, 88 (1990), 149-52 (p. 151).

³² *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

The Final Years: Excursions in Time and Space

Expanding Intellectual Horizons: 'The View From Mental Heights'

Charlotte Smith's literary career ended abruptly with her death on October 28 1806 at the age of fifty-seven. In the last years of her life Smith broadened her intellectual interests and she pursued two major strands of knowledge: history and science, integrating these into her political poetic agenda. A fascination with botany is already apparent in some of Smith's earlier sonnets but she first really capitalises on this interest in two prose works: *Rural Walks: in dialogues: intended for the use of young persons* (1795) and *Rambles Further: A Continuation of Rural Walks* (1796). These were followed in 1798 with *Minor Morals, interspersed with sketches of natural history, historical anecdotes, and original stories*, in which she brings together the second intellectual strand of these later years. Two other prose works are relevant here in that they consolidate these areas of her thinking: *History of England, from the earliest records, to the Peace of Amiens, in a series of letters to a young lady at school* (1806) and *The Natural History of Birds, intended chiefly for young persons* (1807). While I do not intend to focus on these prose texts here, Smith's expanding areas of intellectual interest feed into her political vision and these texts can provide a useful contextualising background to her later poetic works.

Two poetry collections emerge out of the same two intellectual strands as these prose works: *Conversations Introducing Poetry: chiefly on subjects of natural history. For the use of children and young persons* (1804) and the collection which she was working on at the time of her death, and which was published posthumously in 1807, *Beachy Head, Fables and Other Poems* (hereafter abbreviated to *BHFOP*). This chapter will work through Smith's later political and poetic agenda by following the dual threads of history and science, which dominated the writings at the end of her life, within these two collections. Because of this thematic interest the two collections will be looked at in tandem rather than consecutively, which seems appropriate since the books

overlap in terms of content, with two poems originally published in *Conversations* later being incorporated in *BHFOP*.

Both *Conversations* and *BHFOP* appear to be almost prophetically guided by an impulse to transcend Smith's disturbing and hopeless vision of eighteenth century life lived as a woman, and to find some kind of intellectual or philosophical solution to the trap of oppressive tyrannical power, which is usually figured as male, and her own powerlessness. She seems to be seeking in these poems a standpoint which would move her beyond the desire for oblivion and death, which she figures as an outlet for the poor and oppressed, and the madness/death choice which she shows is available to women. Ironically these final collections are imbued with a quest for life. She uses the discourses of botany and history, which allow her to speak from the margins of public discourse, to subtly undermine social conventions and order, and to construct for herself a point of challenge to the male establishment. Fancy is an important strategy in Smith's use of these discourses, it is what grants them a transgressive potential. In an essay entitled 'The Politics of Fancy in the Age of Sensibility', Julie Ellison suggests that '[a]s imaginative exercise, fancy is bound up with the prospect, the view from mental heights'.¹ In these final poems Smith uses the 'empowering potential of fancy' (Ellison, p. 229) to make political use of history and science, to offer an intellectual commentary on key areas of early nineteenth century politics: gender roles, French/English relations, and commerce, and finally to offer a vision of the decline of civilisation.

The Politics of Science

Smith's late poems utilise various scientific discourses, including botany, geology and ornithology, and I want to suggest that far from these being an apolitical recourse into nature, the usage of such discourses at this time has political significance. The question of women's involvement in science throughout the last few centuries has produced an outpouring of critical works in recent years, with titles such as *Hypatia's Heritage: A History of Women in Science from Antiquity to the Late Nineteenth Century* by Margaret Alic and *The Scientific Lady: A Social History of Women's Scientific Interests 1520-1918* by Patricia Phillips, both being published in 1990 and providing useful historical overviews. More recently still, attention has turned to specific sciences and

their gendered significance, with the close links between women and botany generating much interest. Two works are important here in that they look at women's writing in relation to the discourses of botany: Ann B. Shter's *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England 1760-1860* (1996) looks at a number of women writers, in the period of relevance to me and beyond, in terms of botany and gender, including a brief section on Charlotte Smith; and Judith Pascoe in an essay entitled 'Female Botanists and the Poetry of Charlotte Smith' (1994) looks specifically at a selection of poems by Smith which utilise the science of botany, in relation to Romanticism and other key discourses of the period.

While all of these critical works offer a broadly feminist reading of their subject matter, a few seem to strain in their attempts to suggest that women's influence in scientific areas was more significant than has been supposed. Some, like Shter, are forced into the conclusion that women's scientific writings usually confirmed accepted gender ideologies, and that women's involvement in the sphere of science 'enlarged gender practices but did not radically challenge them'.² The sense of strain in some of the arguments put forward to suggest a more radical interpretation of women's engagement with science can engender a sense of frustration in the reader. In a review of a new work on the subject, *Women, Science and Medicine 1500-1700* edited by Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton, Miranda Seymour criticises the book's attempts to add a few more names to the list of women scientists of the past:

The argument for re-evaluation is not always convincing. The fact that Newton wrote very oddly on theology but is still regarded as the father of classical physics does not imply that the Duchess of Newcastle's chaotic outpourings might be treated more seriously if we ignored the bizarre dress sense that earned her the nickname 'mad Meg'. She was not a scientist and she influenced nobody.³

Seymour is being reactionary, but there is a temptation when looking at histories of women and science, to argue against the grain of the evidence that more women moved beyond the conventional in their scientific involvement than actually seems to have been the case. In Shter's book, as I have suggested, there is an acceptance that women did very little to challenge ideological assumptions about their role in

society through science, and Shterir is inevitably forced into the conclusion that in most botanical dialogues and poems written by women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the floral imagery is used in ways which ignore the troubling question of female sexuality and which confirm the restrictive stereotypes of women along with their domestic role. Despite this, I want to suggest that there is such a thing as a politics of science in this period and to look at the meaning of this phrase, first in a general sense, and then specifically in relation to Smith. I also want to argue, while being wary of pushing the argument to implausible levels, that Smith does move beyond the conventional in her poetic use of science.

Although the emphasis in most women's scientific writing in the late eighteenth century is conservative, when the scientific revolution really took off in the early years of that century, women's immediate interest in and involvement with science was overtly connected to feminism. Some examples of such links are gathered together in a brief section of Phillips' *The Scientific Lady*, under the heading of 'Feminism and Science in the Eighteenth Century', but despite the radicalism of the implication of these linkages little is made of them in the rest of the book.⁴ Crucial to me seem such connections as articulated in *Woman Triumphant: or, the Excellency of the Female Sex; asserted in opposition to the Male*, published in 1721 by a 'Lady of Quality'. In this, as Phillips notes, the author 'conveys an impression of a ferment of scientific activity among women at this time' and links this to a feminist awareness:

I think it is high time to look about Us, and to vindicate Our Sex; to let them know the value we ought in Justice to set upon ourselves; to rouse up our courage, and fire our Breast with a worthy Indignation, and Resentment against such inhumane Treatment as we daily meet with, that we may no longer give Pre-eminence to such vain, thoughtless, and ungovernable Animals, as Men of what Denomination soever. (cited in Phillips, p. 68)

Here, involvement in science and other branches of Enlightenment learning, is shown to have given women an awareness of the inequalities of their social position. Several other of the examples which Phillips cites suggest that the early years of scientific development engendered the real beginnings of feminism, articulated so much more famously in the 1790s. It is unsurprising, given this linkage of scientific involvement and social revolution, that the boundaries of science were carefully

policed over the next few decades, and women given access to only carefully chosen and limited fields of learning. Nevertheless, I would suggest that scientific involvement, increased knowledge and social changes, remain firmly linked in the minds of later women working within the fields of science permitted to them, and that this link emerges in the imagery of their writing.

The telescope and microscope proved to be extremely popular with women in the mid to late eighteenth century, and the discoveries made by these instruments became incorporated into the imagery of women's writing. There are very practical reasons for women's increasing usage of these instruments, not least the fact that they were relatively affordable for middle-class women and that their use was culturally sanctioned, since 'optical instruments' were seen to 'bring women closer to God'.⁵ I would suggest however, that the fascination which these instruments held for women lies also in the fact that they provided an imaginative freedom, which was perhaps linked in a complex way with the early connection between women's involvement in science and social freedom. While women were forced to pursue their interests within domestic confines, including their scientific interests, and while they did not have the freedom to wander the world freely as men of their class did, through telescopes and microscopes they were able to see beyond their domestic sphere into uncharted territories. The telescope opened up the skies to women and the microscope enabled them to see whole worlds in tiny spaces. Both, I would argue, are integral to women's sense of science as freedom at this time, and this is suggested in poems like Barbauld's 'A Summer Evening's Meditation' in which she is able to roam imaginatively through space, and in Smith's 'Flora' in which she is able to fantasise other worlds through the close study of plants. Significantly, in both of these imaginative excursions, made possible through science, the other worlds imagined transform themselves into social spaces characterised by female power, again linking women's use of science with social revolution and feminism.

Women's involvement in the study of botany became part of the turbulent debate on sexual politics which dominated the last decade of the eighteenth century. Shterl notes that,

[d]uring the political turmoil of the 1790's, Linnaean plant sexuality became an emblem of questionable politics for those whose gender ideology excluded women from sexual knowledge or who equated sexual knowledge with practices discordant with their ideas about femininity. (Shteir, p. 27)

In a persuasive article entitled “Jacobin Plants”: Botany as Social Theory in the 1790s’, Alan Bewell examines the ‘revolutionary role that botany had come to play in the sexual debates of the 1790s’, arguing that while [t]raditionally a conservative discipline, for a brief moment botany played a major role in redefining human sexuality’.⁶ That botany was at the centre of the hotbed of sexual controversy in the 1790s, is apparent in Polwhele’s direct attack on women botanising using the Linnaean sexual system of classification in *The Unsex’d Females*, which he describes as not in accordance with ‘female modesty’.⁷ For Polwhele, the study of botany by women is deeply tied up with fears about female knowledge and sexuality, as is apparent in his prurient description of women botanising:

With bliss botanic as their bosoms heave,
Still pluck forbidden fruit, with mother Eve,
For puberty in sighing florets pant,
Or point the prostitution of a plant;
Dissect its organ of unhallow’d lust,
And fondly gaze the titillating dust[.] (Polwhele, 29)

In the references to botanical works found in her footnotes, Smith demonstrates that she had in fact read Linnaeus’s *English Botany* in the original, and not merely the watered down version of botanical classification by William Withering, *A Botanical Arrangement of All the Vegetables Naturally Growing in Great Britain* (1776), which was designed mainly with women in mind and which avoided Latin terms and sexual classification. Smith had also read closely Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden* (1791), which refuses to use Withering’s toned down version of botanical classification and reverts instead to Linnaean sexualized botany, if anything emphasising the sexual aspect of the lives of plants. Bewell argues that through the Linnaean system of classification,

[e]ighteenth-century botany...made literal what had previously been a traditional metaphoric association between flowers and sexual organs. What made it more radical was that Linnaeus consistently went beyond

biological analogies in order to import *social* analogies into his descriptions of plant life. (Bewell, p. 133)

At this time all usage of floral imagery, because of its cultural connotations, has a wider political significance and contributes to the debates surrounding the question of female sexuality. For Smith, having read Linnaeus and Darwin, such imagery has a great deal of subversive potential, and I will explore in detail what she does with this imagery in my reading of her poem 'Flora' in the next section.

Women's involvement in science and the question of the extent of acceptable female knowledge also became tied up in the debates about women's education, another key area of public debate at this time which Stuart Curran links to feminist polemics.⁸ The eagerness with which women took hold of the opportunity to move, even in a limited way, into the sphere of science, previously culturally assigned exclusively to men, testifies to their desire to move beyond the restrictive perimeters prescribed for their lives. In the debate over women's education Darwin also appears as a forward-looking figure, penning in 1797 *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools*. Shteir describes this text as one in which he

outlined a widely inclusive and progressive pedagogy, featuring science subjects and much more physical education than would have been common for those teachers and parents who pursued a feminine ideal of delicacy. Along with arithmetic, geography, natural history, mythology, and drawing, he recommends botany as a subject in itself.[.] (Shteir, p. 26)

In using botany and other sciences in her poetry Smith enters an important public debate about women's education and propriety, and clearly in her enthusiastic grasping at the limits of knowledge permitted, she advocates progressiveness. In referring to Linnaeus' original text she also reverts to the Latinate classification system, and makes intensive use of Latin botanical terms in her poems and footnotes. As a symbol of that whole world of formal learning from which women were excluded in the eighteenth century, Latin nomenclature was adopted with relish and exuberance by Smith and other women writers, pointing to their enthusiasm to be granted wider access to knowledge. The intensive use of Latin scientific terms in her poetry, which are often incorporated into the poems themselves and not merely

footnoted, suggests that she intended the poems to be read as acts of 'intellectual as well as artistic assertion' (Pascoe, p. 195), and testifies to her desire to expand the permitted horizons of women's knowledge.

Interventions in Science: 'An Antepast of Paradise'

Despite some of the more conservative ways in which scientific and in particular botanical imagery was used by women at this time, the study of these areas offered an imaginative and in some ways practical freedom to women, which may have been perceived as the first step towards other kinds of intellectual liberation. As several critics of the period have pointed out however, women's involvement in scientific fields was severely hampered by their debarment from official public scientific discourse:

They were excluded from formal participation in the public institutions of botany and science. They could not be members of the Royal Society or the Linnean Society, could not attend meetings, read papers, or (with very rare exceptions) see their findings published in the journals of these societies. (Shter, p. 37)

Restricted and excluded from such public worlds most women found recourse in informal botanical writings, such as dialogues written for children with a maternal/teacher figure describing basic aspects of science, and as Shter observes '[w]ith notable exceptions, women's writing about botany contributed to the diffusion of knowledge rather than to its creation' (Shter, p. 61). Smith too adopted this teacherly mode in *Rural Walks and Rambles Further*, and also in the format of the collection I am concerned with here, *Conversations*, but she also cleverly utilises the public voice which the publication of these texts gave her, to offer her own observations and on occasion to argue with male scientists.

Once again it is Smith's use of footnotes which points us to an alternative reading of her poems and demonstrates their cultural and political significance. In the reviews of *BHFOP* and *Conversations* these footnotes are played down and dismissed, with one reviewer noting desultorily that '[n]otes are added to all the poems, but of no material value'.⁹ In these footnotes however, while she does cite male scientific authority, regarding the details of natural history which are incorporated into her poem, in a fairly conventional way, on occasion she far more radically challenges that

authority. In a long and detailed footnote to her poem 'Ode to the missel thrush' for example, Smith actually refutes the findings of the naturalist Gilbert White in his *Natural History of Selborne* (1789), on the basis of her own observations:

Missel Thrush. *Turdus viscivorus*. Mr. White, in his account of singing birds, puts this among those whose song ceases before Midsummer. It is certainly an error. This remarkable bird, which cannot be mistaken for any other, began to sing so early as the second week of January; and now I hear him uttering a more clamorous song, the 8th of July, between the flying showers. Whenever the weather is windy or changeable, he announces it by a variety of loud notes. There is only one bird of this kind within hearing, who sang last year to the beginning of August.¹⁰

Such a challenge to male authority is transgressive in that it does not conform to any of the assumptions about feminine behaviour at this time; she is not hesitant and does not display any humility or modesty in her correction of White, instead she evinces a confidence and enthusiasm about her own knowledge.

In one of the numerous footnotes to *Beachy Head*, this audacity is confirmed as Smith challenges the father of eighteenth century botanical classification himself, Carl Linnaeus:

Ophrys muscifera. Fly Orchis. Linnaeus, misled by the variations to which some of this tribe are really subject, has perhaps too rashly esteemed all those which resemble insects, as forming only one species, which he terms *Ophrys insectifera*. See *English Botany*. (Poems, p. 236)

Smith's tendency to interact with male scientists may stem from an awareness of other women's contributions to science. In another footnote, appended to her description of the 'warm nasturtiums glow' (16) in the poem 'The Moth', she notes that this phenomenon was first documented by one of Linnaeus's daughters, and adds her own observations to give weight to the discovery:

nasturtium. *Tropaeolum majus*. This is one of the flowers which is said to have a sort of glory, or a light halo of fire apparently surrounding it, of an evening of dry weather - a phenomenon first observed by one of the daughters of Linnaeus. I once thought I saw it in the Summer of 1802. (Poems, p. 186)

As well as challenging male scientists, Smith also uses the arena of her footnotes to record and publish her own scientific discoveries in a way that cleverly makes use of the format available to her. Through her footnotes Smith is able to transcend the role of women as merely disseminators of knowledge, and actually contribute to the accumulation of the new. That her contemporaries found such interventions in science transgressive is suggested by the fact that some reviewers sought to undermine this display of knowledge, one complaining that '[]ittle inaccuracies occur more frequently than we could have supposed' in Smith's use of Latin nomenclature and in her botanical references.¹¹

This incorporation of botanical knowledge into a domestic context through the mediation of a maternal teacher figure is identified by Shteir as the 'familiar format' (Shteir, p. 81), and typically such poems and dialogues teach women how to be proper ladies through the analogy of flowers, although she suggests that there is a more positive side to this arrangement, in that at least in this role the female speaking voice is granted some power and authority. Smith employs this strategy in *Conversations*, in which 'Mrs. Talbot instructs her children George and Emily simultaneously in natural lore and poetic forms and usage'.¹² Despite the conventionality of this genre and the accepted female maternal role which it encodes, Smith's poems often step beyond the realm of simple moral teaching aimed at children. Frequently these poems contain coded or allegorical messages which do not merely accept and confirm eighteenth century gender relations, but which in some instances attack and critique them. In this context allegory becomes a strategy not of reinforcing the status quo, but of importing radical commentary into the text. The same technique is adopted by Smith in her *Fables*, which include narratives of male infidelity and unfair gender relations in marriage.¹³

As I have suggested, because of her scientific reading Smith could not have been insensible of the significance of defining women's sexuality through images of flowers. She may also have been aware however, of one context in which this connection was used more radically for the purposes of feminist politics, in Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In this text, as Bewell argues, Wollstonecraft repeatedly and 'explicitly attacks the traditional metaphoric

association of women with flowers', in passages such as the diatribe on Barbauld's poem, 'To a Lady with Some Painted Flowers', in which Wollstonecraft 'emphasises the harmful implications of the botanical analogy' (Bewell, p. 137). Like Smith however, Wollstonecraft is aware of how deeply entrenched are the mythological and cultural links between women and flowers, and so instead of avoiding the connection, Bewell argues that she emphasises it and appropriates it for her own ends:

rather than rejecting botany, she actually incorporates it into the *Vindication*, not to affirm, but to demystify the social production of female sexual difference. Because flowers had been used to construct 'the distinction of the sex,' Wollstonecraft uses botany to deconstruct it. (Bewell, p. 137)

According to Bewell's argument, Wollstonecraft uses the discourse of botany analogically to express her argument that women's present state of sickly, passive delicacy, is a consequence of men cultivating them to be so, and that given different metaphoric air and soil, women would revert to their natural, rational state. Smith's poem 'Flora' uses the discourse of botany in a similarly subversive way, also offering a social commentary through analogy which functions if anything more radically than Wollstonecraft's polemic.

'Flora' is the longest and most striking of the poems published in *Conversations*, and was one of the poems later also included in BHFOP. It appears to be a conventional feminine poem with an exuberance of floral imagery, but as in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, this imagery is appropriated for feminist ends with the poem providing a narrative of female power and transgression. Much of the subversiveness of the poem rests in the way in which it rewrites Darwin's *Botanic Garden*, a poem with which there are clear points of comparison in terms of language, imagery and genre. As I have suggested, politically Darwin was progressive, advocating expansion and change in the permitted fields of women's knowledge. His poem however, while offering transgressive potential in its enlisting 'Imagination under the banner of Science' (cited in Shteir, p. 26), is problematic in its figuring of gender relations which conform to stereotype. While Smith enjoyed *The Botanic Garden*, describing it in a footnote as a poem of 'elegant extravagance'

(*Poems*, p. 275), there was clearly much in it that she chose to change. Shterir views Smith's re-write of the poem as an acceptable 'version for girls' (Shterir, p. 71) which 'sidesteps plant sexuality and marriage in the plant kingdom' (p. 72), but I would suggest that what Smith does with Darwin's poem can be interpreted in much more radical terms.

Smith does avoid the almost prurient sexual imagery found in Darwin's poem, but this is achieved not by turning the sexual system of plants into a fraternal or paternal relationship, a strategy deployed by some women of the period, but by underplaying the personification of the plants themselves and thus avoiding any significant masculine presence in the poem altogether.¹⁴ While Darwin personifies vegetable life throughout his poem, figuring it in terms of male/female sexual relations and thus confirming what Wollstonecraft sees as the destructive symbolism of women's gendered identity figured through flowers - imagining in 'The Loves of the Plants' a rose as a blushing 'bashful bride' (Canto I, 18) and a 'virgin lily' who 'droops' with 'secret sighs' (Canto I, 15) - Smith avoids any such simple association between women and flowers, by having only the Goddess of Botany herself and her 'female Fays' (80) overtly feminised, by subtly masculinising some flowers and by presenting other plants in more straightforward scientific terms.¹⁵ In Smith's poem the inherent passivity and weakness of women in Darwin's poem is avoided, while female power and transgressiveness are emphasised. While she does allocate some traditional gender roles, with the masculinised sylphs being engaged in warfare, even Smith's feminised sylphs are figured in terms of strength and power; when the sylphs appear in the second part of Darwin's poem, 'The Economy of Vegetation' however, they are given only a nurturing feminine role, waking spring with a 'soft touch' (Canto I, 429), chafing the 'wan cheeks' and repairing the 'ruffled plumes' of the western wind (Canto I, 431). By a subtle change of strategy Smith rewrites not only the sexual relations found in Darwin's poem, but the sexual politics which skew them. In Smith's fantasy masculinity and male presence are underplayed; it is a fantasy of a world 'Remote' from the 'crimes and follies of mankind' (2), which, as we know from other of Smith's poems, means a world ruled by men. This fantasy of female power, in which Smith usurps scientific discourse and loaded cultural images for her own ends, is ushered in by 'Fancy' (7), figured here as the 'Queen of ideal pleasure'

(8). This feminised, powerful imaginative force works on scientific knowledge to offer a potent image of female subversion.

The classical personification of 'Flora' as a female goddess was widely used in the botanic culture of the eighteenth century and as we have seen, the connection between women and flowers was deeply entrenched in the ideology of the period.¹⁶ Like Wollstonecraft, Smith uses this connection, and she emphasises it by a complex train of associations and by using significant botanical names in a way which suggests the extent to which women and flowers are blurred in eighteenth century discourse, evoking this cultural symbolism in a far more subtle and complex way than Darwin. Flora herself in the poem is described as clothed in flowers and plants:

Her slender feet in *Cypripedium* drest.
The tufted Rush that bears a silken crown,
The floating feathers of the Thistle's down,
In tender hues of rainbow lustre dyed,
The airy texture of her robe supplied;
And wild *Convolvulas*, yet half unblown,
Form'd with their wreathing buds her simple zone;
Some wandering tresses of her radiant hair
Luxuriant floated on the enamour'd air,
The rest were by the *Scandix*' points confin'd,
And graced, a shining knot, her hair behind -
While as the sceptre of supreme command,
She waved the *Anthoxanthum* in her hand. (36)

The common names of many of the plants listed here in the Latin are themselves gendered; the *Cypripedium* for example is known as 'ladies slipper' and the *Scandix* as 'Venus's comb'. In dressing her female Goddess of Flora in flowers which themselves are linguistically feminised, Smith draws attention to the close correlation between women and flowers in eighteenth and nineteenth century discourse. In making this connection Smith ensures that the poem itself functions on an allegorical level as well as a fantastic one, and through this allegorical dimension she subverts the more conventional links between women and flowers found in Darwin's poem.

Having evoked the cultural symbolism linking women and flowers in this complex way, to point out suggestively the extent to which flowers stand for real women in

the discourse of the period, the poem goes on to connect women through floral imagery with an exuberant and at times transgressive power which undermines the status quo. The Goddess, or as she is sometimes described, the 'Queen of ideal pleasure' (8), is surrounded by 'female Fays' (80), whose names are taken from the parts of flowers: Floscella, Petalla, Nectarynia, and Calyxa. Like the Goddess these fairies are dressed in flowers and plants, and, like her, they do not conform to the stereotypes of femininity. Rather than being passive, weak, and demure as in Darwin's poem, these helpers have 'magic powers' (51), row the Queen along in her skiff 'With pliant arms' (154) and 'wanton' (106) in her smile. Further undermining negative stereotypes of femininity is the Goddess herself who is supremely powerful. As she descends to earth, the vegetation of land, river and ocean explodes into a seductive carnival of colourful, physical and intellectual excess which verges on the erotic:

From every swelling bulb its blossoms rise;
Here blows the Hyacinths of loveliest dyes,

....

Peeps the blue Gentian from the softning ground,
Jonquils and Violets shed their odours round;
High rears the Honeysuck his scallop'd horn;
A snow of blossoms whiten on the Thorn.

....

A thousand leaves along the stream unfold;
Amid its waving swords, in flaming gold
The Iris towers; and here the Arrowhead,
And water Crowfoot, more profusely spread[.] (111; 115; 155)

The flowers open and present themselves in a sexualised way, but there is no actual penetrative contact between the opening feminised flowers and the more masculine phallic ones, and consequently the heterosexual power games present in Darwin's poem are avoided and replaced by a mutually erotic exuberance.

Smith's poem can be compared to another poem of the period which depicts Flora's Kingdom, 'The Backwardness of Spring Accounted For', published anonymously in the 1780s, but which may have been the production of Anna Seward. In this poem, as Shterir notes, 'Linnaean botany' is used as a 'panacea for social disorder' (Shterir, p. 15) and 'Flora exalts and legitimates decorum, hierarchy, and traditional authority' (p.

16). Smith's poem uses Linnaean botany conversely to suggest fundamental disruptions of the social order. Its pagan overtones combined with the exuberance of its imagery, its playfulness, and the overturning of hierarchical order by a power wielded by a feminised Goddess, connect it with Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque. Unlike the earlier poem, 'Flora' utilises the subversive potential of the carnival, and celebrates 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order'.¹⁷ Although strictly speaking Smith's vegetable world is not true to the carnival as described by Bakhtin - in that there still remains a strong sense of hierarchy in the poem, with the Goddess having supreme power - nevertheless, the poem marks a significant overturning of established order. Another aspect of Bakhtin's carnivalesque is also relevant here, and that is an apparent 'release from time'.¹⁸ Whereas in *The Botanic Garden* the Goddess's arrival is the harbinger of Spring, and thus the natural order of the seasons is confirmed, in Smith's vision and under the power of her female Queen, this temporal order is overturned as 'Flowers of all hues and every month appear' (110).¹⁹ This release from time inherent in Smith's vision of nature is important and we shall return to it in the last section of this chapter, which looks at the links which Smith makes between history and botany.

The 'delicious dream' (139) of female power which the poem enacts, is also linked to Smith's vision of a female afterlife by the last line of the poem, which describes the fantasy as 'an antepast of Paradise' (228). Like Smith's previous hints of a feminised heaven, the patriarchal order of a Christian heaven is here usurped by a female goddess, who now uses women's cultural links with flowers to take control, which can perhaps be read as a metaphor for a desire to use science to transform women's position in eighteenth century society. This is a woman dominated paradise and it is figured as a decadent, excessive, transgressive space. The poem also links this female afterlife to nature, with which, as with flowers, women are culturally aligned and which as we shall see, feeds into Smith's vision in her later poems of nature as immortal, overcoming the works of man. Once again this connection is usurped and made to work for Smith's own ends. Shter remarks that '[b]otany became part of the gender economy for women in England, and they could make it work for

them' (Shteir, p. 4), but few women usurped this connection so overtly or with such transgressive potential as Smith does in this poem.

A Panoramic View of History: 'The Rifted Shores'

Beachy Head, like *The Emigrants*, is a lengthy meditative poem in blank verse and was left unfinished at the author's death. Structurally, it resembles the earlier poem in that it moves around themes and topics in a seemingly random way, which would bear comparison to the stream of consciousness techniques of Joyce and Woolf; indeed, Stuart Curran has described the poem as striking 'distinctly modern chords'.²⁰ Consequently the absence of an 'end' is not necessarily obvious on reading the text, but it is important to keep in mind that we do not know how this poem was intended to close, or with what image Smith wanted us to be left.²¹ More importantly perhaps, we have no preface written by Smith through which *Beachy Head* can be contextualised; as the publisher notes in his own introductory piece to the posthumous collection, the publication was delayed partly because of 'the hope of finding a preface....which there was some reason to suppose herself had written' (cited in *Poems*, p. 215), but this was never found. Although we do not have such a contextualising preface, the poem is weighted with lengthy and detailed footnotes, many relating to the natural history details incorporated in the poem, but others describing historical incidents. It is this historical facet of the poem that I intend to address here, and in particular how Smith's political vision of British/French relations is worked through her interests in time and history.

Most of the limited critical attention given to *Beachy Head* has looked at that poem in relation to Romanticism. Deborah Kennedy for example describes it as 'a remarkable example of what M. H. Abrams calls "the greater Romantic lyric"', and suggests that the 'autobiographical sections....demonstrate the proximity of Smith's and Wordsworth's sensibility'.²² Elsewhere Kennedy argues that one section of the poem 'makes a remarkable companion piece to *Tintern Abbey* and even echoes its language, as Smith recalls her happy childhood in the south of England where she became a worshipper of nature'.²³ Stuart Curran suggests that *Beachy Head* and other poems from the posthumous collection which it headed, testify to 'an alternative Romanticism that seeks not to transcend or absorb nature but to contemplate and

honor its irreducible alterity' (Curran, 'Introduction', p. xxviii). Judith Pascoe makes a similar argument on the basis of Smith's use of close botanical detail, describing her as a 'new model of the Romantic poet....one who, confronted with a field of daffodils, would count petals before launching into verse' (Pascoe, p. 207).

One of the few critics who discusses, albeit briefly, the significance of *Beachy Head* on its own terms and not in relation to Romanticism, is Sarah Zimmerman. At the close of an essay on 'Charlotte Smith's Letters and the Practice of Self-Presentation' Zimmerman notes that in this poem

Smith's speaker extends her line of sight beyond the contemporary political scene to document historical event....we find Smith sketching the profile of a figure who represents a new role for herself: she is a mediating figure whose 'knowledge' and 'understanding' are responsible for what we can see....This emerging figure lends the capacity and resources of an individual 'Memory' and the practices of description, narration and persuasion developed in a lifetime of letter-writing and publication to a new task: the work of cultural recollection.²⁴

Zimmerman rightly acknowledges the sense we get in *Beachy Head* of Smith trying to find new answers and stretch her intellectual horizons, but here I want to emphasise the significance of these acts of 'cultural recollection' in the poem, which have an overtly political purpose and are not merely ends in themselves.

In *Beachy Head*, the fascination with time which can be traced throughout her sonnets, is played out and developed, and Smith moves from the autobiographical emphasis of those sonnets to an emancipatory vision of human history. The poem seems obsessed by all aspects of temporality: memory, both personal and national; geology, with a sense of the past embedded in the landscape; history as narrative; and the changes of the seasons. Time is most significantly the medium through which Smith translates her politics of the present, through historical analogies and in time travel, which allows her to imagine social revolution and the decay of oppressive power. The setting at the opening of the poem is significant; her vantage point is the 'stupendous summit' (1) of Beachy Head, the 533ft chalk promontory on the coast of Sussex, an iconic symbol of England, close to Smith's childhood home, and site of a disastrous battle for the English against the French in 1690. The

spot rears over the channel and grants Smith a supremely omniscient perspective, from which she can survey the effects of geologic time and the symbolic division of nations.

Adding to this sense of omniscience is 'Fancy' which can 'go forth', allowing Smith to 'recline' (4) in a more acceptably feminine role (a strategy which was deployed to much the same effect by Barbauld in 'A Summer Evening's Meditation' and in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*). Fancy can defy the Newtonian laws of time and space and move around freely not only in the physical landscape but also within the past, giving us a privileged access to history. The sheer physical eminence of this position and the power of imagination combine, granting Smith a tremendous vista of vision:

Contemplation here,
High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit,
And bid recalling Memory unfold
Her scroll voluminous[.] (117)

In its exploration of the past, the poem enacts a reversal of Barbauld's time travel into the future in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, 'Where wanders Fancy down the lapse of years' (113), but Smith like Barbauld is using this strategy of Fancy travelling through time to offer a panoramic political narrative.²⁵ The temporality which is explored in *Beachy Head* is no longer limited to Smith's personal remembrances, but opens out into national memory and these memories are embodied in the landscape itself. Memory and landscape are combined in a similar way by the late twentieth century Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who uses the preserving capacity of Ireland's bog landscape as a repository of his country's past. He writes that 'I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it'.²⁶ Like Smith, Heaney uses this landscape of memory for deeply political purposes, to say something about the 'national consciousness' (Heaney, p. 55) of the present.

One important aspect of the poem in political terms is Smith's comment on the long standing antipathy between France and England, which had been heightened by the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic wars, leading to a mood of rampant Gallophobia in Britain. Smith addresses the cultural and political divide

between France and England, by travelling back through geologic time and viewing the symbolic moment when the land mass was fractured, physically dividing Britain from Europe. Through the power of Fancy, which is used in 'Flora' to fantasise a world within tiny spaces, Smith now scans vast vistas of time and represents:

....the strange and awful hour
Of vast concussion; when the Omnipotent
Stretch'd forth his arm, and rent the solid hills,
Bidding the impetuous main flood rush between
The rifted shores, and from the continent
Eternally divided this green isle. (5)

Smith is clearly fascinated by this primary moment of separation.²⁷ In a footnote to the above lines she elaborates on the idea and describes how she has attempted to discern the original connection between the two countries in their coastlines:

I confess I never could trace the resemblance between the two countries. Yet the cliffs about Dieppe, resemble the chalk cliffs on the Southern coast. But Normandy has no likeness whatever to the part of England opposite to it. (*Poems*, p. 217)

From this moment of physical separation, which also establishes links between the countries by emphasising the fact that they were once joined, Smith takes us on a historical journey through French/English hostilities, a journey which she maps in her prose works of the period, and which has been charted closely and usefully by Matthew Bray in his essay entitled 'Removing the Anglo-Saxon Yoke: The Francocentric Vision of Charlotte Smith's Later Works'.

In this article Bray offers a subversive reading of *Beachy Head*, which delves beneath the poem's apparently patriotic tone and discovers a covert 'Francocentric' message embedded in the poem's account of history. Bray's reading of the poem is generally very convincing, and seems all the more so when we consider Smith's support of and interest in the French nation in other poems and novels. The core of Bray's argument is neatly summed up early on in the paper:

From 1798 until her death in 1806, [Smith] articulated an increasingly seditious vision of England's historical and political ties to France, a

vision that went against the patriotic Anglo-Saxonism that consumed England during the early years of the war.²⁸

As evidence of this sedition, Bray cites passages from *Beachy Head* and two other of Smith's later works: *Minor Morals* (1798) and *History of England* (1806), which both provide interesting contextualisations for this poem. In *Minor Morals* for instance, Smith argues explicitly against cultural boundaries and differences between nations, suggesting the need to emphasise instead a common humanity:

Nor could the Omnipotent implant in the inhabitants of two divisions of the earth parted from each other only by a few leagues of water....a *natural* antipathy, so that, from mere hatred and detestation of each other, the study of a whole generation of these men should be mutual annoyance, and their whole ambition to sweep each other from the earth. (cited in Bray, p. 155)

Bray argues that in her *History of England*, 'Smith mimics and then subverts....nationalistic Anglo-Saxonism' (Bray, p. 155) in a way that re-writes the contemporary patriotic mood. He sees *Beachy Head* as the 'logical conclusion' of Smith's 'subversive historiography' (p. 156), in which she reverses the popular emphasis on Anglo-Saxon history by depicting this as a history of Norman conquests and successes.

On reading the poem closely it does seem true that while overtly critiquing France for its hostilities, Smith lingers over the details of Anglo-Saxon defeats, not only in the text of the poem, but also in a long footnote on page 222, and that she focuses in particular on the Norman invasion of 1066. As Bray suggests, such an emphasis can only have one political meaning at this time since:

For the English, the Norman conquest immediately brought to mind fears of a second French conquest by Napoleon. Thus, in the contemporary imagination, William the Conqueror equalled Napoleon, and the Normans represented the modern French, poised to invade England at any moment. (Bray, p. 156)

While Bray does offer an interesting and compelling reading of this aspect of *Beachy Head*, he fails to account for the, at times, overtly patriotic language of the poem. In relation to his reading here for example, he ignores lines in which Smith specifically

takes up the parallels between the Norman invasion and the present moment of expected French invasion:

But let not modern Gallia form from hence
Presumptuous hopes, that ever thou again,
Queen of the isles! shall crouch to foreign arms.
The enervate sons of Italy may yield;
And the Iberian, all his trophies torn
And wrapp'd in Superstition's monkish weed,
May shelter his abasement, and put on
Degrading fetters. Never, never thou!
Imperial mistress of the obedient sea;
But thou, in thy integrity secure,
Shalt now undaunted meet a world in arms. (143)

This is obviously a relevant passage in relation to Bray's argument and needs addressing, since here Smith quite explicitly makes the link which Bray claims the poem suggests at a covert level and does so in distinctly patriotic terms, her language echoing closely that epitome of English patriotism, Thomson's 'Rule Britannia'.

I would suggest that it is possible however, even plausible, to read these lines as deeply ironic, and as such performing a subtle act of undercutting contemporary patriotic discourse. Smith refers to Britain here in apparently celebratory terms as an 'Imperial mistress' (151), but this seems an unlikely term of triumph for Smith, since earlier in the poem she critiques Britain's acts of commercial pillaging of the Empire (lines 40-59), the description of which also renders problematic the idea that Britain's 'integrity' is 'secure' (152). The seemingly patriotic phrase continues, 'mistress of the obedient sea', which again appears a very incongruous image when planted in a poem and oeuvre which repeatedly depicts the sea as an uncontrollable force, flooding the land and destroying symbols of power. In the conflicts between what Smith overtly says in these lines and the deep instability of the language in which she says it, I would suggest that this patriotism can be deconstructed. While she is forced to offer this comment to France in the context of a poem illustrating Britain's repeated defeats at the hands of the French, what comes across in her language is a further criticism of Britain. In the irony inherent in these lines, which closely echo Thomson, the passage turns into a parody of British patriotism. Through the allegorical use of Britain's military defeat in the past and her subversion

of British patriotic discourse, Smith comments on the political present. Her verdict is that in terms of French/British military prowess, the French are superior and Britain's imperial smugness is unfounded.

Exotic Captives and 'Dazzling Comets': The Effects of Commerce

In several of her late poems, Smith formulates an attack on certain kinds of commercial and colonial activities through natural history narratives, which confirms the idea that her apparently patriotic celebration of Britain in *Beachy Head* functions ironically. In a number of the poems in *Conversations* Smith uses natural history to import social messages, similar to those found in her poems written in the early 1790s, allegorically into the text. Such messages form only a small aspect of the poem and are often heavily coded, pointing to the increasingly repressive culture in which Smith was writing at the turn of the century. In 'To the Fire-fly of Jamaica, Seen in a Collection', she uses the image of a trapped 'Fire-fly' to offer a critique of slavery but also to make links between a certain kind of scientific enterprise and an exploitative colonising agenda, in a way that is reminiscent of Barbauld's sustained critique of male scientific agendas and the exploitation of other peoples, which she depicted as entwined in the eighteenth century Enlightenment project.

The fire-fly's earlier freedom is remembered in terms of its exotic beauty and liberty, suggesting a link between its capture and British colonialism:

How art thou alter'd! since afar,
Thou seem'dst a bright earth wandering star;
When thy living lustre ran,
Tall majestic trees between,
And Guazume, or Swietan,
Or the Pimento's glossy green,
As caught their varnish'd leaves, thy glancing light
Reflected flying fires, amid the moonless night. (1)

A slave is introduced as an inhabitant of the same exotic landscape as the fire-fly, and his plight is linked to the insect's linguistically; he too is a 'recent captive' (17) who wants to break free from his chains and 'find his liberty in flight' (19). The fire-fly in the case and the Negro in chains, are connected by the poems exotic imagery and by the removal of their liberty, and thus the poem's overt critique of trapping

insects and keeping them in glass cases extends allegorically into a subtle critique of slavery. The allegory offers further insights into both acts of exploitation, since both the slave and the fly lose something intrinsic to themselves in captivity, as Smith notes ‘The glass thy faded form contains,/But of thy lamp no spark remains’ (49). This observation about the fly serves to explain the slave’s actions, which are described in a footnote; thus when the slave attacks his tormentor, we are made to see that this is because of his condition of being enslaved: ‘[t]he wretched Negro, fearing punishment, or driven to despair by continual labour, often secretes himself in these obscure recesses [mountain caves], and preys in turn on his oppressor at the hazard of his life’ (*Poems*, p. 205).

There is a second level of allegory within the poem however, since the fire-fly is also a metaphor for fashionable women who, like ‘dazzling comets....appear/In Fashion’s rainbow atmosphere’ (57). At some level the poem hints that such women must share the guilt for colonial slavery, since they are the consumers of the silks and jewels imported from overseas, a critique which echoes Barbauld’s attack on certain kinds of women who perpetuate imperial capitalism in *Epistle to William Wilberforce*. Smith, like Barbauld however, points not to women as a biological category but to a specific social group, and other poems from this collection suggest that the colonising exploitative attitude towards nature is characteristic of the male sex. A number of other poems in *Conversations* emphasise an alternative approach to the natural world which is highly ethical, and which is mediated through a female teacher. In ‘A Walk by the Water’ for example, carefully observed physical details of fish in their natural habitat are noted and a version of scientific enquiry is validated by Smith through Mrs. Talbot, which involves watching and learning without actually intruding on nature:

There the golden carp is laving,
With the trout, the perch, and bream;
Mark! their flexile fins are waving,
As they glance along the stream.

Now they sink in deeper billows,
Now upon the surface rise;
Or from under roots of willows,
Dart to catch the water-flies. (5)

The peaceful and non-intrusive agenda of the scientific observers is emphasised in the final stanza of the poem in an address to the fishes themselves:

Do not dread us, timid fishes,
We have neither net nor hook;
Wanderers we, whose only wishes
Are to read in nature's book. (17)

The scientific agenda put forward in *Conversations* is of knowledge of nature acquired for 'food, for health, or pleasure' ('Wild Flowers', 53), and within this there is an emphasis on non-plunder. In 'Invitation to the Bee' for example, although the bee provides food with his 'delicious alchemy' (32), the poem suggests that nature offers its goodness: the flowers to the bee and the bee in turn to people. Smith emphasises that the honey is not forcibly taken:

Yet fear not when the tempests come,
And drive thee to thy waxen home,
That I shall then most treacherously
For thy honey murder thee. (37)

The simplicity of these poems reminds us in a way 'Flora' does not, that these are verses intended for children, and the scientific study advocated here is to some extent deliberately designed as being suitable for young minds. However, several other instances of this non-intrusive science appear in this collection, and some identify an alternative plundering approach to nature as a masculine enterprise, suggesting that the poems should be read in gendered terms.

In 'The Wheat-Ear' the bird of the title is threatened by the 'wiry snare' (24) prepared by the 'shepherd boys' (25), and in 'The Hedge-Hog Seen in a Frequented Path' the teacherly maternal narrator asks:

Wherefore should man or thoughtless boy
Thy quiet harmless life destroy,
Innoxious urchin? (1)

In this latter poem, Smith uses this act of childish male destruction as an allegory for much more serious acts of male violence in the adult, public world of politics, and thus draws attention to the fact that these apparently simple children's verses function in complex ways. She presents acts of inhumanity and violence in the public world as in conflict with rational thinking:

Should man to whom his God has given
Reason, the brightest ray of heaven,
Delight to hurt, in senseless mirth,
Inferior animals? - and dare
To use his power in waging war
Against his brethren of the earth? (7)

These lines make a plea for Enlightened rational kindness as opposed to irrational, unenlightened cruelty. Within the former set of criteria, the female speaking voice implies, women take over from men as the gender who prioritise reason in their lives.

In 'To My Lyre' Smith presents a satire on the world of commerce, a world which creates the demand for acquisitorial wars and which engenders an exploitative approach to nature. She draws on her personal experiences to offer a critique of the values of mercantile society:

Far from my native fields removed,
From all I valued, all I loved;
By early sorrows soon beset,
Annoy'd and weary past endurance,
With drawbacks, bottomry, insurance,
With samples drawn, and tare and tret;

With Scrip, and Omnium, and Consols,
With City Feasts and Lord Mayors' Balls,
Scenes that to me no joy afforded;
For all the anxious Sons of Care,
From Bishopgate to Temple Bar,
To my young eyes seem'd gross and sordid. (7)

As Janet Todd notes, Smith distances herself from the world of commerce with some degree of 'snobbishness' but to this there is 'an added urgency and specificity' about a 'mentality that replaced ethical with financial considerations'.²⁹ She utilises

here the ‘terms employed in the West-Indian import business of Smith’s father-in-law’ (Curran, *Poems*, p. 311), which she became familiar with during her marriage, but the attack is not purely personal, and these are used to offer a critique of commercial interests and the dominant economic thinking of her day as expounded by Adam Smith. In a number of her poems there is a latent critique of Adam Smith’s doctrines which sanction individual mercantile enterprise and argue for commerce as a creator of national wealth. In this poem, that critique is made more overt with her ironic reference to the influential text in which his ideas were propounded, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). She describes satirically ‘Proud city dames, with loud shrill clacks,/“The wealth of nations on their backs”’ (19), pointing to where the ‘national’ wealth is really located.

The imagery of this poem makes clear that the effect of commerce and the growth of mercantile interests is to create increased luxury for the wealthy few, symbolised here by the ‘City Feasts’, ‘Lord Mayors’ Balls’, and ‘Proud city dames’ feasting on ‘calepash and callipee’ (29), the prized turtle meat imported from the merchants’ overseas plantations. Again at some level women are implicated in the guilt of colonialism and slavery, but as in ‘To the Fire-Fly of Jamaica’, a very specific social group is identified by Smith rather than an entire gender. There are in fact two kinds of women present in the poem, the ‘Proud city dames’ who contribute to the world of commerce, and Smith herself who clearly wants to distinguish her own set of values from those of that world, describing herself as of ‘a different species’ (24), believing not in the same mercenary motives but in values entirely inappropriate to the world of commerce, ethics of pity, charity and humanity. This latter set of values echoes the feminised approach to science identified earlier which challenges an exploitative mentality that is gendered male, and as Smith suggests that both wealthy middle-class collectors and shepherd boys are implicated in this agenda, her condemnation of male plunder may be seen to transcend social class in a way that her critique of women of fashion does not. While Smith does criticise certain groups of women who perpetuate the capitalist system, the society she describes is patriarchal and at some level women as a social and biological group are themselves victims of a male establishment, since Smith has repeatedly shown that the cruel subtext to this increased middle-class wealth is not only the continued poverty of

labourers, and the slavery and exploitation deployed overseas, but also the bargaining with women for economic ends, so that the women themselves function within this society as commodities.

A ‘Transient Gloom’: Visions of a Collapsing Civilisation

These recurring criticisms of commerce and colonialism in Smith’s late poems move towards some kind of resolution in her final collection. In *Beachy Head* she focuses specifically on Britain’s colonial empire, and on the plundering of the continent of Asia for its hidden jewels and the slavery deployed to rob them:

There the Earth hides within her glowing breast
The beamy adamant, and the round pearl
Enchased in rugged covering, which the slave,
With perilous and breathless toil, tears off
From the rough sea-rock, deep beneath the waves.
These are the toys of Nature; and her sport
Of little estimate in Reason’s eye:
And they who reason, with abhorrence see
Man, for such gaudes and baubles, violate
The sacred freedom of his fellow man[.] (50).

Through descriptions like this Smith makes a subtle link between Britain and the various invaders of British shores whom she catalogues in the poem: the Romans, the Danes and the Goths. Britain, she suggests, shares with these barbaric invaders an aggressive colonising agenda, and consequently there is an implied message to Britain in her descriptions of time effacing the conquests of these earlier invaders:

Hither, Ambition come!
Come and behold the nothingness of all
For which you carry thro’ the oppressed Earth,
War, and its train of horrors - see where tread
The innumerable hoofs of flocks above the works
By which the warrior sought to register
His glory, and immortalize his name[.] -
The pirate Dane, who from his circular camp
Bore in destructive robbery, fire and sword
Down thro’ the vale, sleeps unremember’d here;
And here, beneath the green sward, rests alike
The savage native, who his acorn meal
Shar’d with the herds, that ranged the pathless woods;
And the centurion, who on these wide hills

‘Ambition’ functions here as a coded term for Britain, with her arrogant imperial colonising agendas and her colossal Empire. Smith uses history in a similar way to Barbauld in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, to figure the way in which time effaces the wealth and power of whole civilisations and to offer a warning to Britain:

All, with the lapse of Time, have passed away,
Even as the clouds, with dark and dragon shapes,
Or like vast promontories crown'd with towers,
Cast their broad shadows on the downs: then sail
Far to the northward, and their transient gloom
Is soon forgotten. (434)

Time is shown to function much as death does in Smith’s earlier poems but on a much grander scale; while death is a leveller which erodes individual distinctions based on class or wealth, making all men equal, time renders meaningless the wealth of whole countries and empires.

Images of time decaying and eroding buildings in particular also recur throughout these later poems and carry a coded political commentary. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke’s Conservative defence of the *ancien régime* and his denunciation of the revolution, he uses an image of a castle to figure the state. He argues that the French people, instead of engaging in revolution, should have ‘repaired’ the ‘walls’ and ‘built on’ the ‘old foundations’ of the ‘noble and venerable castle’ which was the French political state.³⁰ This metaphor was picked up on by several radical writers including Smith. In an essay on her novels entitled ‘Charlotte Smith’s Emblematic Castles’, Loraine Fletcher argues that Smith’s ‘castles or mansions’ function as ‘images of the state’ throughout the radical years of the 1790s and that she repeatedly satirises this metaphor in her novels by depicting ancient mansions with rotting, rat infested wainscoting and castles with birds nesting in turrets.³¹

In the imagery scattered throughout Smith’s late poems we find that nature has now taken over these buildings almost completely. They are now no longer figured as decaying and animal infested but lying in fragments, and the territory on which they

stood is reclaimed by nature, imagery which suggests that she has now given up all hope of the rotting and corrupt states of Europe being repaired. The relics of these once impressive buildings are inhabited by labourers and hermits. In *Beachy Head* she describes the 'ruin'd battlements' of a 'dismantled fortress' as now the 'humbler homestead' (502) of a 'tiller of the soil' (500) and in another 'castellated mansion' (506), 'In rude disorder fallen' (508), a lonely 'stranger' (507) sets up home and here, 'Among the ruins' (510) and the 'fragments gray of towers and buttresses..../often he would muse' (509). This imagery suggests a return to a pre-civilised existence, an idea which is confirmed by Smith's depiction of a second hermit in the poem who lives in an even more primitive 'cavern' (673), a 'flint-surrounded home' (686) in the rocks of Beachy Head. These images of lone inhabitants of ruined castles or sea caves suggest a Rousseauistic critique of the corrupting powers of civilisation and progress, and an advocation of a return to a primitive state in which social hierarchies are negated.³²

The stories of the two hermits themselves, as told within the poem, also suggest that Smith was espousing a rejection of the social order in favour of a life which allowed for a closer commune with nature. Both of these internal *émigrés*, like the social outcasts she writes about in the 1790s, are paralleled with Smith herself. The first, the 'stranger' who inhabits the ruined castle has been 'cross'd in love' (521) and writes poetry to ease his suffering, fragments of which he leaves behind him when he disappears. The second, like Smith has been 'long disgusted with the world' (674), is both 'outraged..../By human crimes' (689) and yet 'still acutely fe[els]/For human misery' (690), and is obsessed by the sea. Both of these men, and the gender is significant, are wish-fulfilments for Smith; she herself in *The Emigrants* desired to 'abjure Society' (*The Emigrants*, 42) and hide herself in 'some lone Cottage, deep embower'd/In the green woods' (43), but with several children and grandchildren reliant on her for support, this was never an option. She displaces her desires onto two male hermits who are free to escape. Both men also enact a very literal return to nature as they are in the course of the poem absorbed back into its wild zones; the first 'in silence, gliding like a ghost/....vanish'd' (571) and was 'Lost among the deepening gloom' (572) of the forest, and the second drowns in the 'angry flood' (720) of the sea.

Nature clearly functions in an important way for Smith in these later poems along with time. The symbols of civilisation and emblems of power: castles, fortresses and abbeys, are shown to decay and fall into ruin, finally becoming nothing more than mere undulations on the landscape as nature once again takes over, a 'turfy knoll' (400) on which a shepherd sits, unaware that

....deep beneath
Rest the remains of men, of whom is left
No traces in the records of mankind[.] (401)

Smith's interest in nature in her later poems, like her interest in botany, is crucial to her political outlook and in this repeated, almost obsessive, figuring of a return to nature she offers a radical political critique of contemporary life. In her vision it is nature which endures through time as a transgressive obliterating force, while civilisations, empires and states crumble into dust. In 'The horologe of the fields' nature is depicted as a recorder of time, which like a clock stands outside the laws of death and decay, counting the hours in an abstract manner. The poem emphasises the recurrence of the endless cycle of the seasons and shows that only by locating one's self in nature is it possible to step outside the flying years:

Time will steal on with ceaseless pace,
Yet lose we not the fleeting hours,
Who still their fairy footsteps trace,
As light they dance among the flowers. (69)

The laws of Time are escaped through this recourse to nature, which functions in a sense like a permanent site of the carnivalesque; to lose oneself in nature offers a release from time like that brought about by the descent of the Goddess of Botany to the earth, and perhaps explains Smith's fascination with the fate of the two hermits and with botanical detail at the end of her life.

In 'Saint Monica', the poem which inspired Wordsworth's exalted comment on the influence of Smith on English poetry, she again figures this dual image of the decay of a once impressive building and the enduring presence of nature. The abbey of St. Monica is described as a ruin, a 'dismantled scite' (1), which embodies the fragments of its own history. Despite the fashion for ruined abbeys and castles in the literature

of the period, the emphasis in Smith's late poems is not on the ruins in terms of their melancholic or Gothic propensities but of the way in which nature has begun to reclaim the territory, which functions if anything as an antidote to the Gothic.³³ The 'falling archway' is 'overgrown/With briars' (10), 'half the falling cloisters are conceal'd/By ash and elder' (22), and 'matted tod's' of ivy bind 'the arch and buttress' (50). Time throws his 'oblivious pall' (86) over individual men and their works and through a collusion with nature comes to represent a potent power:

From the mapped lichen, to the plumed weed,
From thready mosses to the veined flower,
The silent, slow, but ever active power
Of Vegetative Life, that o'er Decay
Weaves her green mantle[.] (87)

Nature is figured in this poem as the only enduring presence, while symbols of patriarchal power are quietly obliterated, and out of this vision Smith constructs a new philosophy and hope:

Oh Nature! ever lovely, ever new,
He whom his earliest vows has paid to you
Still finds, that life has something to bestow;
And while to dark Forgetfulness they go,
Man, and the works of man; immortal Youth,
Unfading Beauty, and eternal Truth,
Your heaven-indited volume will display,
While Art's elaborate monuments decay,
Even as these shatter'd aisles, deserted Monica! (94)

While patriarchal European power is imaginatively effaced through time, nature is granted a durability and in these last poems Smith succeeds in connecting women to a transgressive botanicised nature. This construction of nature allows her to sidestep the more negative links between woman and a silenced, abstracted nature which are pervasive in literature of the period, replacing a problematically mythologised 'Mother Nature' with images of Flora, the potent and powerful Goddess of Botany, but also with a scientific vision of the natural world. By inscribing botanical details into her own poetry moreover, Smith seems to attempt to align her own writing with the durability of nature rather than with the decaying works of Art.³⁴

In these late poems Smith appears to recognise the potential capacity of her poetry to transcend time, and thus the inscription of her suffering into these verses is an attempt to speak beyond her own political moment. 'To My Lyre' may have been the last poem that Smith actually wrote since, as her sister notes, it 'appears, from the feebleness of the handwriting, to have been composed a very short time before her death', and in it, as well as satirising the world of commerce, she seems to reach towards the idea that her poetry might transcend the oppressions which she herself could not escape:

And as the time ere long must come
When I lie silent in the tomb,
Thou wilt preserve these mournful pages;
For gentle minds will love my verse,
And Pity shall my strains rehearse,
And tell my name to distant ages. (43)³⁵

Contained and silenced in the tomb, Smith imagines a vicarious freedom and a lasting voice granted to her through her poetry. The simple desire for death as oblivion which is present in her early work has now been left behind, and Smith imagines a durability through her words. Stuart Curran argues that '[w]hat saves Charlotte Smith from the inanition she inscribes is quite simply its inscription' and her final political gesture, as well as the recurring impulse of her life, is the attempt to inscribe her own suffering into cultural memory.³⁶ In her vision of the ruin of patriarchal law and the accompanying return to a pre-civilised state, Smith also looks for a space in which to insert her own work which would transcend the politics of her own moment; as critics we in turn should ensure that her poetry is read outside the gendered constructions placed on it by her contemporaries, so that the final lines of this poem read not as ironic but as prophetic.

Notes

¹ Julie Ellison, 'The Politics of Fancy in the Age of Sensibility', in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837*, ed. by Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 228-255 (p. 229).

² Anne B. Shterir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England 1760-1860* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 86.

³ Miranda Seymour, 'Medicine Women: A Review of *Women, Science and Medicine 1500-1700*', ed. by Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton', *Sunday Times*, 9 November 1997, p. 6.

⁴ Patricia Phillips, *The Scientific Lady: A Social History of Women's Scientific Interests, 1520-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), pp. 67-73.

⁵ Margaret Alic, *Hypatia's Heritage: A History of Women in Science from Antiquity to the Late Nineteenth Century* (London: The Women's Press, 1990), p. 79.

⁶ Alan Bewell "‘Jacobin Plants’: Botany as Social Theory in the 1790s", *The Wordswoth Circle*, 20:3 (Summer 1989), 132-9 (p. 132).

⁷ Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem, Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature* (London: Cadell and Davis, 1798), p. 8.

⁸ Stuart Curran, 'Women Readers, Women Writers', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 177-95 (p. 185).

⁹ 'Beachy Head, with other Poems. By Charlotte Smith', *British Critic*, 30, August 1807, 170-4 (p. 174).

¹⁰ *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 200.

¹¹ 'Conversations introducing Poetry: Chiefly on subjects of Natural History. For the Use of Children and Young Persons. By Charlotte Smith', *Monthly Review*, 49 (January 1806), 79-82 (p. 82).

¹² Stuart Curran, notes to 'Conversations Introducing Poetry', in *Poems*, ed. by Curran p. 177.

¹³ See for example 'The Truant Dove' and 'The Lark's Nest' in *Poems*.

¹⁴ See for example Shteir's account of Frances Rowden (Shteir, p. 64).

¹⁵ Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden, a Poem, in two parts; containing The Economy of Vegetation and Loves of the Plants. With Philosophical notes* (London: Jones, 1824); Quotation taken from *Poems*, ed. by Curran. All subsequent quotations from Smith's poetry are taken from this edition and first line numbers only given in parenthesis in the text.

¹⁶ As with other disadvantages women could make such a connection work for their own ends and as Shteir suggests 'cultural linkages' which connect 'flowers and gardens with women and nature and with femininity, modesty, and innocence' in the 'eighteenth and nineteenth centuries....helped smooth the path for women into botanical work of many kinds' (Shteir, pp. 2-3).

¹⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. By Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 10.

¹⁸ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 302.

¹⁹ The breakdown of time and the carnivalesque are also features of the Saturnalia, which as I suggested in relation to Barbauld's feminising of that planet, may have suggested to her a connection between women and established laws being overturned. See Chapter Two.

²⁰ Stuart Curran, 'Introduction', in *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. xix-xxix (p. xxviii).

²¹ Stuart Curran argues that *Beachy Head* may not have been as 'unfinished as the introductory note to the volume assumes it to be' since 'a work that begins atop a massive feature of the landscape and ends immured within it bears a remarkable coherence, the more so since in no poem of the period can one find so powerful an impulse to resolve the self into nature' (Curran, 'Introduction', p. xxvii). Duncan Wu however claims that '[t]here are some textual details that support the belief that the poem is unfinished....and its structure, particularly towards the end, seems to become increasingly fragmentary' (Duncan Wu, in *Women Romantic Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu [Oxford: Blackwell, 1997], p. 71), and certainly contemporary reviewers read the poem as unfinished, with the *Monthly Review* claiming that the poem 'appears, as well as from an incompleteness in the structure as from some small errors in versification, to have wanted the author's last corrections ('*Beachy Head*; with other Poems. By Charlotte Smith', *Monthly Review*, 56 [May 1808], 99-101 [p. 100]).

²² Deborah Kennedy, 'Charlotte Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 25:4 (1994), 259-60 (p. 260).

²³ Deborah Kennedy, 'Smith, Charlotte Turner (1749-1806)', *Encyclopaedia of Romanticism: Culture in Britain, 1780's-1830's*, ed. by Laura Dabundo (New York and London: Garland, 1992), pp. 538-540, (p. 539).

²⁴ Sarah Zimmerman, 'Charlotte Smith's Letters and the Practice of Self-Presentation', *Princeton University Chronicle*, 53:1 (1991), 50-77, (pp. 76-77).

²⁵ *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994).

²⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 54.

²⁷ Smith draws here on a fairly long tradition of literary representations of this divide. She is most likely to have been familiar with Thomson's depiction of this severance in Book IV of *Liberty* and Collins' description of the same primary geologic moment in his 'Ode to Liberty'.

²⁸ Matthew Bray, 'Removing the Anglo-Saxon Yoke: The Francocentric Vision of Charlotte Smith's Later Works', *The Wordswoth Circle*, 24:3 (1993), 155-8 (p. 155).

²⁹ Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction, 1660-1800* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. 203.

³⁰ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 121.

³¹ Loraine Fletcher, 'Charlotte Smith's Emblematic Castles', *Critical Survey*, 4:1 (1992), 3-8 (p. 7).

³² In Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755) he argues that in a state of nature all men were free and equal and that it was only in the division of labour and the institution of property that social inequality began, leading to avarice, luxury, power struggles and war. Smith refers to Rousseau frequently in her novels but his social theories can also be traced in her poetry.

³³ In reply to a suggestion from the President of the Linnaean Society, that she introduce elements of botany into a novel Smith replied that 'The present rage for gigantic and impossible horrors, which I cannot but consider as a symptom of a morbid and vitiated taste, makes me almost doubt whether the simple pleasures afforded by natural objects will not appear vapid to the admirers of spectre novels and cavern adventures' (cited in Shterl, p. 70).

³⁴ The language Smith uses in this poem is very closely echoed by Keats in his 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' and the fact that that poem enacts a reversal of Smith's argument, that nature as opposed to Art will endure, may suggest that Keats had Smith's poem in mind when writing it. Smith's lines 'immortal Youth,/Unfading Beauty, and eternal Truth'(98) which she applies to nature, seem to be co-opted by Keats for Art in his closing lines: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know' (*John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 2nd edn [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973], 49), and in his conclusion it is the works of man, in this case the Urn, which are granted immortality.

³⁵ [Catherine] Dorset, 'Charlotte Smith', in *The Lives of the Novelists*, by Sir Walter Scott (London: Dent, [n.d]), pp. 303-34 (p. 309).

³⁶ Stuart Curran, 'Romantic Poetry: The I Altered', in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. by Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 185-207 (p. 205).

Conclusion

Establishing Difference

In presenting my readings of the political poetry of Anna Barbauld and Charlotte Smith within the context of a shared historical trajectory, this thesis has sought to foster the opportunity for contrast and comparison between these two important women writers. What I would hope emerges from this study is both the individuality of the two women's work and an awareness of some areas of shared agenda. In my introduction I put forward the ideas of Albert Memmi and Nancy Hartsock, in order to suggest that if we are to challenge the status of women writers of the period as 'Other' and to deny the 'mark of the plural', in which they are presented in terms of sameness, we need to register the differences in their politics and poetics.¹ Part of my rationale in looking at the poetry of two women in some depth was the possibility of raising such questions of difference. In conclusion then I want briefly to make some comparisons between Barbauld and Smith, in relation to their ideological positioning and the different political interests this generates, in relation to the political strategies they deploy, and in terms of their contributions to the politics of the period, and finally, to offer a comparative assessment of the two women's politics in terms of radicalism and feminism.

Ideological Positioning and Differences of Political Vision

In placing biographical details before my readings of their poetry I have sought to facilitate an awareness that Barbauld and Smith's political agendas are a product of a specific socio-cultural context and historical moment. Such information also allows us to make distinctions between the ideological positions from which the two women wrote. By pointing to specific oppressions and experiences, such as Barbauld's exclusion from seats of learning and Smith's legal powerlessness, this thesis has challenged any naïve assumption that the two women shared an agenda simply because of a mutual biological experience as women. I have attempted to establish instead the way in which both women's political agendas were informed by their surroundings, class positioning, familial relationships, education and other formative experiences. Briefly here I want to redefine these two sets of experiences

and analyse them in relation to each other, suggesting the ways in which disparate social and cultural experiences engender different political visions.

In geographical terms, Barbauld and Smith inhabit spatially distant and culturally dissimilar regions, and this affects both their political interests and their approach to politics. Barbauld's formative years are spent in Warrington, Lancashire, an auspicious setting for intellectual and imaginative advancement. During the years Barbauld lived there, 1758-1774, the county of Lancashire was experiencing rapid industrialisation and undergoing significant changes in terms of landscape, economy, and population size. The middle classes found themselves prospering and benefiting from the tremendous diversity of cultural input caused by rapid changes in population. Warrington itself is at the intellectual centre of this exciting region, fostering with its dissenting academy an atmosphere of liberal progressiveness and scientific questioning, within the wider context of economic development. Despite Barbauld's later removals to Palgrave and Stoke Newington, it is Warrington, as a social and cultural experience which lingers in her poetry and informs her political agenda and outlook. Although Warrington is only really vividly described as a cultural and geographical site in 'The Invitation', the legacy of Barbauld's upbringing in the town can be traced in most of her writing, which is diverse in content, questioning in approach, and liberal and intellectual in tone.

Smith's formative geographical experience on the other hand is primarily rural Sussex, a landscape which invests her poetry with a nostalgic longing for an idyllic pre-adolescence, before the laws and oppressions of a patriarchal social system begin to affect her. This landscape becomes politicised in its comparative relation to Cheapside, as it takes on the symbolism of a natural existence untainted by mercantile interests. In terms of Smith's politics however, the most significant geographical location is not rural Sussex but Brighton, to where she moves in the 1790s. It is here, in this peculiarly turbulent setting, that she momentarily loses her literary isolation and mingles with the radical literati, meeting the authors of the seditious pamphlets published during these years and encountering the tremendous enthusiasm for a revolution which threatened to overthrow the old European order. These geographical locations, rural Sussex, Cheapside, and Brighton all appear within

Smith's poetry as actual imagined sites. More so than Barbauld, Smith actually positions her poetry within geographical frameworks, in particular Brighton, so that her poems become invested with the politics of the sites themselves. There is a juxtaposition in Smith's poetry between a harking pack to the past - through recollections of childhood and the history of landscape - and a very vividly realised present - encapsulated in subtitles like '*a Morning in November, 1792*' - but for her both the present and the past carry a potent sense of place, and are invested with the resonances of specific geographical territories.²

As well as inhabiting distant and disparate geographical locations, Barbauld and Smith are also positioned very differently in terms of class. Barbauld, as the daughter of a dissenting minister - later a tutor at the dissenting academy - is brought up within intellectual middle-class life. The time spent in Warrington functions to make her very aware of her position within this growing class, and she argues for the rights of the upholders of this middle-class way of life, such as the 'industrious tradesmen' and the tutors of the academy, in her political writings.³ As the daughter of landed gentry, Smith's early class experiences are in complete variance to Barbauld's and in her early teenage years she enjoys the typical life of a young débütante. However, her subsequent marriage into a middle-class mercantile family, her removal to Cheapside and her husband's later economic downfall, position her much more ambiguously in terms of class. It is apparent from Smith's political poetry that she feels herself to be in an indeterminate class position and equivocally placed in relation to the marginalised members of society to whose plights she responds. Unlike Barbauld - who generally takes up the causes important to the liberal middle-class such as industrial development and the slave trade, and who speaks from the within this class - Smith speaks for the poor and oppressed from a position which shifts between that of the benevolent lady and that of one who shares their suffering.

For Barbauld the most significant factor in the construction of her political vision is her involvement with a dissenting community. Her upbringing as the daughter of a Unitarian dissenting clergyman and her early removal to the dissenting culture of Warrington, profoundly affect her life and her political outlook. Not only does

dissent have a tremendous impact on Barbauld in a practical way, allowing her to be granted a classical education and exposing her to new scientific ideas, but it also affects her in ideological terms, giving her a lifelong interest in the cause of freedom and an anti-establishment, marginalised positioning in relation to the key political issues of the day. Dissent fosters an atmosphere in which a questioning of the status-quo exists alongside deeply held religious beliefs. The practical aspects of dissent feed into the ideological ones so that the intellectual background of Warrington and the education she was given, provide her with the tools with which she could put the political questioning engendered in this environment to good use.

For Smith it is personal suffering which more than anything else informs her political agenda. The sense of loss engendered in her by the early death of her mother is overwhelmed by the sense of exile she experiences through her marriage. Her father's marketing of her like cattle to the mercantile Smith family remains the focal point of her anger throughout her life, with her subsequent misery merely compounding this original cruelty and confirming her awareness of the appalling legal, economic and political powerlessness of women. It is primarily her life experiences - her early enforced marriage, her almost constant state of labour and nursing, the deaths of several of her children, the violence inflicted on her by an adulterous husband, and her own legal powerlessness - which provide the anger that in turn informs her politics. She speaks from the position of the victim of social mores and political systems, and seeks to undermine these by the force of her suffering.

These factors - geographical location, class positioning, and life experiences - engender very different political interests in the two women. Politically Barbauld is drawn to issues which are born out of the experience of Warrington, such as the technological and scientific revolution which she perceived taking place around her, and to political debates which were high on the liberal and dissenting agenda, such as the invasion of Corsica and the Test and Corporation acts. She takes the unwritten creed of freedom from Unitarian dissent and applies it to a wide range of public debates, campaigning for the liberty and rights of persecuted groups and peoples in the political sphere. Barbauld is generally interested in the big issues of her historical

moment, in European politics and in key public debates. Although individuals do appear within Barbauld's political agenda, in the shape of figures like Joseph Priestley, John Howard, and William Roscoe, these have a place in her politics because they contribute to the dissenting narrative of progress and to events being enacted on a wider political stage.

In contrast to Barbauld's interest in public debates and causes, Smith is primarily concerned with the individual sufferer within society and history. Whereas for Barbauld individuals appear because they contribute to wider narratives and debates, for Smith the suffering of individuals is the central subject of her politics and arrests the larger narratives of history, both literally - as she pauses to tell their stories - and imaginatively - with individual anger and desire bringing ruin to symbols of power. This interest in the individual sufferer is a response to Smith's own sense of personal oppression and victimisation, and at some level the outcast figures of her poems - the poor, the exiled, the imprisoned, and the hermits - all function to dramatise her own story and to make claims for her own plight

The discourse through which these two disparate political agendas are presented is also informed by Barbauld and Smith's experiences, since the way in which their political voice comes to us is largely determined by the literary, educational, and ideological tools available to them. Barbauld is educationally better equipped than Smith to usurp official discourse, and she audaciously takes up authoritative public formats like the tract for her own use. The intellectual background of Warrington, the education she was given, and the relative intellectual encouragement she met with from her progressively minded acquaintances and family, give her the wherewithal to put the liberal questioning of the status-quo engendered by that environment to good use. Smith on the other hand, having received only a superficial education in female accomplishments and writing under extreme practical difficulties - not least economic necessity and as the single mother of nine children - produces a much less confident and sophisticated political discourse. Alongside practical difficulties Smith writes from a weaker political position, without the authority of dissenting religion behind her and is forced to flatter her reading public. Consequently political critique is often injected into her work in a veiled or strategic

way, or in the form of pleas for pity and charity toward human suffering. Both women however, make the best of the tools available to them and I want to compare the strategies they use to intervene in politics, and to suggest the ways in which these engender different kinds of political expression.

Political Strategies

Choice of genre is clearly an important shaping factor in political discourse and at this level Barbauld and Smith also diverge. In generic terms Smith is more experimental than Barbauld; she resurrects the sonnet and plays with that form, bending it to a shape most appropriate to the expression of intense human suffering and anarchic, barely containable misery. She also experiments with blank verse, producing her two lengthiest and most significant poems, *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head*, in this form, which suits her technique of shifting between moments of interiority - in which she describes private suffering - and explorations of political oppressions and tyranny in the external world. Through both the sonnet form and blank verse Smith places a vividly realised personal anguish within the context of widespread human misery and thus socialises and politicises that suffering.

Barbauld also uses blank verse in her early transgressions into science and politics in 'A Summer Evening's Meditation' and 'Corsica', but the form which she uses most frequently in her early poems and which she would later return to in *Epistle to William Wilberforce* and her most transgressive piece *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, is the heroic couplet. She exploits the possibilities of this form for political purposes, so that her incremental and logical method of arguing is reflected by and carried along by the poem's driving insistent rhythm. She also claims with this form the authority of neo-classic reason, logic and order for her major political transgression written in response to the chaos in Europe in the early years of the nineteenth century. As well as usurping neo-classic authority Barbauld also appropriates religious authority by harnessing the hymn form for political ends. In 'To a Great Nation', 'Peace and Shepherd', and 'Lines to Samuel Rogers' she adopts the hymnal stanza with its four line verses in iambics and simple rhyming scheme, which she would use elsewhere in a more straightforward way to express her faith.⁴ As I have suggested in my readings of her poetry, for Barbauld the political hymn and the religious hymn are conflated,

since in the absence of formal dogma, 'freedom' becomes an unwritten creed of Unitarian dissent. The use of the hymn form as a mode of political expression demonstrates the extent to which dissent influences Barbauld's politics and it grants her an authoritative and subversive political voice. In usurping the hymn form for dissenting political ends, Barbauld challenges the authority of established religion as well as claiming the authority of non-conformist religious belief.

The two forms which predominate in Smith's poetry, the sonnet and blank verse, and those in Barbauld's political verse, the heroic couplet and the hymn, reflect and shape their political discourse. Through her sonnets Smith depicts a barely contained anger and suffering, and in her blank verse poems she connects this suffering to the external world. Barbauld uses the hymn to speak out on political causes which defend an ideal of freedom and heroic couplets for closely argued, often satirical polemics on major national issues. The two women also adopt different forms in their prose writings, some of which I have drawn on in my readings in order to contextualise their poetics. While Barbauld's political prose comes directly in the form of essays and tracts which openly argue, criticise and debate, Smith's political interventions in prose take a more circuitous route, inserted as they are within the narratives of romance novels and in the prefaces and footnotes which accompany her poetry. While Barbauld's political tracts confidently display her polemical skills, Smith's use of indirect strategies allows her to veil her political interventions, either granting her a political voice through fictional characters such as Desmond, her eponymous hero, or by bringing political complaint down to a personal level with narratives of her own suffering under social oppression.

Barbauld and Smith do come together in one area of generic appropriation for political ends. Both women write books for children which function as political weapons in their attempt to influence future generations. The education of children may have seemed at this time to be one of women's few real routes to future social and political change. Barbauld and Smith attempt to instil in the minds of their young readers values which correlate to their own political concerns, such as a non-exploitative attitude towards nature and an understanding of horrors such as slavery,

conveyed through an anthropomorphising of animals and empathetic portrayals of suffering slaves. These works convey narratives of nature and history which reject aggression, militarism and exploitation, and which emphasise instead reason, pity, care, and thoughtfulness. The production of such books suggests that Barbauld and Smith felt the need to look beyond their own generation and historical moment for political change, to the future and to subsequent generations. That this strategy is deployed by them and other women writers of the period suggests an awareness of the lack of real political weapons available to them.

Turning away from genre, there are other shared strategies which grant Barbauld and Smith political empowerment. Both women conjure and deploy a very similarly realised instrument of vision which they term 'Fancy'. Fancy is used repeatedly to grant omniscience and freedom of movement, enabling them to travel transgressively in time and space, and offer panoramic political visions, narratives and critiques. On each occasion when Fancy appears, in Barbauld's 'A Summer Evening's Meditation' and *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, and in Smith's 'Flora' and *Beachy Head*, audacious acts of female transgression occur as the narrative speaker moves freely in time and geographical space, thus challenging the restrictions placed upon the female body in the eighteenth century and the perhaps even tighter restrictions on the female mind. They imaginatively fly upwards into vistas of cosmic space and microscopic spaces expand into whole worlds; transformative social revolutions occur as women take control in these spaces. The past and future are opened out to be explored like mapped territories and Barbauld and Smith are granted visions of ruined empires, and imperialistic tyrannical patriarchal power lying in fragments. As an imaginative weapon, Fancy grants women tremendous empowerment, allowing them to challenge the physical restrictions imposed upon them and to offer subversive visions of the consequence of such movement. As with the use of children's literature, it is significant that both women are drawn to this strategy in their writing, and is suggestive of their very real political powerlessness.

A similar reading may be made of the use of prophecy which appears in both women's writing, though is used to a lesser extent by Smith. Prophecy along with

Fancy functions to grant empowerment, and to allow imaginative movement beyond a restrictive socio-political framework. Both women use the narrative of history and the logic of past experience to project an imagined way out of the present, and in particular to either hint at or envision the doom of the British empire. It is Barbauld who really exploits the full potential of this device though, using it repeatedly as a means of looking beyond a present moment in which she is powerless to effect change. Smith too uses the basic idea of looking to the future, but rather than using the device to imagine social change, deploys it instead to project an end to her present sufferings in an imagined future moment when she will be granted oblivion in death, a vision which points to her much bleaker and despairing political outlook.

While Fancy and prophecy allow Barbauld and Smith to formulate fairly overt political critiques, other more oblique strategies are also used by both women through which they offer a subversive political commentary. Stuart Curran argues that this 'age of repression, censorship, and legal threat enforced a cryptic, allusive, richly layered style' and this repression falls with double weight on to women writers, so that, as Mary Poovey suggests, they are forced to create 'opportunities for self-expression through strategies of indirection, obliqueness, and doubling'.⁵ It is Smith more than Barbauld who really deploys such strategies to their full potential; her political messages are often encoded in fables, historical analogy and scenes of natural turbulence such as the overturning of graves and the sea flooding the land. While Barbauld generally formulates direct political attacks, such as her warning to Britain in *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, Smith disguises many of her criticisms, albeit thinly, under a veneer of patriotism or critique of Catholicism, and issues her own warning to Britain encoded in a critique of Roman and Danish colonialism.

Barbauld on the whole makes a less extensive use of such oblique devices and strategies, speaking out on political issues in polemical forms which announce their intentions such as *An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts* and *Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. On the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade*. Nevertheless she does deploy indirect strategies at some level, even within her openly polemical poems, particularly in relation to gender issues. Barbauld's sense of her right to speak out on politics seems to stem from her background as a

member of a dissenting community which to some extent absolves her from her position as a woman. Thus on issues with which dissenting liberals were involved - the plight of Corsica, the French Revolution, the Test and Corporation acts and so on - she speaks with the authority of Unitarian rationalism behind her. Where she is much less confident of her ground is on the question of women's rights, an issue on which Unitarian dissent itself occupied a problematic position. Barbauld's gender politics are never openly revealed or discussed, but are encoded within her political poems in a way that suggests her unease with broaching the issue. Instead of her usual strategy of overt polemical attack, she uses the Augustan predilection for gendered abstractions and personifications subversively, revealing a complex gender politics at the heart of her poems. Confirming this argument that Barbauld is at her most oblique when gender issues are involved, is her most difficult poem 'The Rights of Woman', in which she openly sets up the question of gender politics but presents a poem which is cryptic, and filled with complex, dense, multi-layered imagery. She plays war and empire imagery off against a stereotypical set of feminised images, not to confirm women's subordination, but to offer a criticism of male imperial politics in relation to gender and to reveal the hopeless inadequacy of the idealised feminine role.

Political Contributions

Barbauld and Smith's major contributions to the political debates of the period are twofold: both try to make politics more accessible and both claim a right to write politically as a woman. Both of these are extremely important given this historical moment of political unrest and gendered awareness. In terms of the first of these contributions, the rendering of politics more accessible, neither Barbauld nor Smith put this agenda forward in writing as a pragmatic programme, but it is apparent that they are concerned with the accessibility of political ideas in their choice of politics as a suitable subject for poetry, and in the case of Smith, for novels. Barbauld's commitment to making political knowledge more widely available is also revealed in her publication of *Civic Sermons to the People* (1792) during the revolutionary years, which explains the principles of democratic government. Of the two, Barbauld is more effective in her translating politics into poetry and making it accessible in this way. She is adept at producing highly readable poems which function as political

propaganda. We can measure her success both by the praise afforded poems like 'Corsica', which was taken up by the supporters of the Corsican cause, but also by the violent verbal attack on *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, which is generated by fear at her satirical skills and the popularity of her poetry. Barbauld's particular accomplishment in these poems is in making distant and unfamiliar peoples, countries, and experiences, seem real and immediate to her audience.

Barbauld is always concerned to bring alive the real social and human consequences of political actions and to translate abstract political discourse into what she terms in *Sins of Government, Sins of the Nation* 'a language more intelligible to us' (*Works*, II, p. 401). In this tract she lists the real effects of war: murder, mutilation, the making of widows and orphans, famine, and the ruin of local economic communities. Her political poems enact this same agenda as she describes the ruthless crushing of the islanders in 'Corsica', the 'bloody scourge' (*Poems*, 8) laid upon the African in *Epistle to William Wilberforce* and most vividly, the devastation caused by the Peninsular war in the fields and villages of Spain at the opening of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*. It is this aspect of Barbauld's political agenda which brings politics into focus for a wider audience, in particular a female audience. As I suggested in Chapter Four, it was the *New British Lady's Magazine* who responded most favourably to *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, and for the readership of that magazine the poem is important since it brings politics into the parlour, and voices the opinion of the silenced women citizens who grew weary of hearing jingoistic propaganda in the British press, celebrating war and defending mass slaughter. Coming as it does in the form of a poem, Barbauld's counter-discourse of reason and peace allows politics to subversively cross over into domestic spheres and drawing room discourse.

Smith also appears to work within an agenda of making politics more accessible, although her major contribution to this aim comes through her novels rather than poetry. In placing long passages which discuss contemporary politics within romance novels, and combining romance plots and political plots, Smith brings the key political debates of her day to a wider female audience, who would otherwise have had little access to the ideas of Burke, Paine, Rousseau and Voltaire. Smith's poems also enact a similar movement between private and public discourse however,

and in *The Emigrants* she succeeds in slotting passages of political commentary within a 'sympathy' poem for the French clergy. As it was in the main women who supported and expressed interest in the plight of the clergy, this would again have made her political criticisms, such as her diatribe against the French tax collectors, available to a wider female audience. It is through her prefaces and footnotes however, that Smith succeeds in slipping political discourse in where it was least expected and where it is most accessible. *Elegiac Sonnets* went into several editions and was widely read, much more so than a political tract would have been. Consequently, Smith's ever more explicit complaints about the British legal system inserted into each new edition of this volume reached a large audience, and moreover, were put forward alongside the sonnets themselves, which contextualise the complaints and dramatise the consequences of power abuse, showing the real effects to be massive individual suffering. The impact of this is similar to Barbauld's technique of translating abstract political discourse into real human consequences. Of the two however, Barbauld seems to have been more successful, since her poems and tracts, with their particular brand of humanised and socialised politics, were on several occasions taken up in the name of particular political causes. Smith, despite the genuine nature of her personal suffering, seems to have engendered a chivalrous response from her audience, and there is little evidence of her effecting an awareness of the subtle demand for political change which was the subtext to her complaints.

Both Barbauld and Smith's attempts to make politics available to a wider audience and more accessible is most successful in relation to women. By discussing politics in novels and widely read poetry, they package political discussion in a way that enables women to encounter such debates while remaining within their domestic spheres. Barbauld and Smith, as well as making political ideas more readily accessible to women, also make claims for women's intervention in politics in their claiming the right to write politically as women. Smith is more open than Barbauld in this matter, formulating an argument in the preface to her novel *Desmond* as to why women had a right to become involved with politics. Her poetry enacts the claim which she makes in this preface, that women suffer from decisions made in the public sphere at least as much as, if not more than men. In poems such as 'The Forest Boy', she points to women's enforced economic and legal helplessness which

causes them to be reliant on men as providers, and then catalogues the starvation, illness and misery which ensues when this male provider is removed as a consequence of war. It is this suffering as a direct result of political decisions which Smith claims gives women a right to have an opinion on, discuss, and write about politics. In pointing to the proximity of the domestic and public spheres Smith challenges the ideology of separate spheres which is crucial to the gender politics of the eighteenth century, at a time when it was most dangerous to do so. She repeatedly points to the proximity of domestic and political issues, and in doing so subverts the eighteenth century notion that the two spheres were separated by an unbridgeable ideological divide.

Barbauld too repeatedly claims her right to write politically but, unlike Smith and other women of the period, she makes no apology and offers no explanation for her transgression into the public sphere. This determination to deny any suggestion of her inferiority to men is echoed by her attempts to push at the limits of acceptable female learning in the areas of science and the classics, and her private grief at the limitations imposed on her own soaring intellect and thirst for knowledge. Publicly Barbauld speaks out with a confidence which belies the gender expectations of the period, voicing her outrage with such force on political matters such as the Test and Corporation acts, that readers were amazed to learn that the angry, ironic, and brilliantly argued tract had emerged from a woman's pen. Unlike Smith, who makes claims for her involvement in politics because of women's enforced reliance on men, Barbauld stakes her claim as political commentator as a 'citizen' (*Works*, II, p. 361) of Britain and challenges the silencing of women on political matters by her skill and dexterity at polemic. She shows herself to be widely read, intelligent, verbally persuasive, skilful in polemic, politically astute, perceptive, and to have at her disposal a dangerous facility in irony and sardonic wit. Her scathing and accomplished political tracts prove not only that women could become involved in politics, but that they could do so in a way which seriously challenged male authority. In her poetry Barbauld is similarly audacious, using this genre to produce not merely veiled political intrusions but overt polemic. Her poems, 'Corsica', 'To a Great Nation', and *Epistle to William Wilberforce*, function openly as propagandist material, written explicitly in support of a political cause, and in two cases used publicly as

propaganda by the supporters of that cause. Barbauld enters into the political world in a way that Smith does not; she not only challenges but repeatedly transgresses the ideology of separate spheres and refuses to remain silent on the turbulent political events taking place around her. Because of her skills in political writing Barbauld is more effective than Smith in staking a claim as a woman to write politically, but because of this talent she is perceived as more dangerous and rigorous attempts were made to silence her, most notably by John Wilson Croker, who cruelly attempts to diminish her political effectiveness through the ridicule of her talents.

Assessment

Attempting to reach conclusions about the effectiveness of Barbauld and Smith's poetry in political terms is problematic, since clearly many of the causes they supported, such as the plight of Corsica and the French Revolution, ultimately failed. Moreover, the backlash against Wollstonecraft and the radicalism of the early 1790s led to such a reactionary reinforcement of conservative values, that writers like Barbauld and Smith were effectively silenced for the next two hundred years. It remains perhaps more useful and relevant to compare them to each other in relation to the extent of their radicalism and feminism, and to assess their political transgressions and visions in this context.

While Barbauld and Smith never met, lived and worked in diverse geographical settings, and came from different social backgrounds, they were linked in the minds of their contemporaries in terms of their radicalism, through their open support of the French Revolution. On Sunday November 18 1792 their names were brought together and in the most radical of contexts: a group of English, Irish and Scottish Republicans meeting together in Paris drank a toast to the 'Lady defenders of the Revolution, particularly Mrs Charlotte Smith, Miss Williams and Mrs Barbauld'.⁶ My comparison of the strategies deployed by Barbauld and Smith in their political writing reveals however that Barbauld is the more openly and consistently radical of the two. In her support of the French Revolution, the slave trade and Corsica, she speaks in a polemical voice which does not hide behind a male persona or disguise itself in any way, while Smith, especially on the subject of the French Revolution, expresses her support through the voice, or rather the pen, of a fictional male

character in *Desmond*, and in *The Emigrants* disguises her support of the Revolution itself to such an extent that this aspect of the poem largely escapes the notice of critics.

Despite differences in the degree to which they display their radicalism both Smith and Barbauld share a political trajectory; they both begin with liberal agendas which move into radicalism during the revolutionary years. The 1790s are important to both women as a period in which their political consciousness is raised, and they embrace the radical thinking of these years. This is the period in which Smith produces her social outcast poems, and Barbauld her poems on women's and slaves' rights, and both join in heatedly with the revolution controversy. During these years, they formulate challenges to Burke along with other radical writers like Paine and Wollstonecraft, Barbauld in *An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts*, and Smith in her novel *Desmond*. Unlike many of the supporters of the revolution however, both Barbauld and Smith refuse to turn their support away from the revolution after 1792 and attempt to reconcile the horrific events taking place in France with their continued belief in the revolutionary ideals. While Smith does however, formulate a critique of the violent actions of the republicans under Robespierre, Barbauld continues to defend the republican cause and argues for the necessity of bloodshed in order to engender revolutionary change. In doing so she demonstrates that her radicalism not only exceeds that of Smith, but also many of her contemporaries.

Since I have argued throughout this thesis that a gender politics underpins many of Barbauld and Smith's political poems, it would also seem useful here to bring together those threads and to assess the extent of their feminism in relation to the feminist discourses of the period. I suggest in my introduction that we should follow Kathryn Sunderland's advice and pay attention to 'the range of women's legitimate responses to situations of male oppression', and while Barbauld and Smith do not overtly campaign for women's rights as does Wollstonecraft, this thesis has aimed to show the ways in which their poetry interacts with the same nexus of discourses which produced the first sustained feminist polemic.⁷ As I point out in my introduction, both women were aligned with Wollstonecraftian feminism by the

Reverend Polwhele and were seen to have 'unsex'd' themselves by their transgressive interventions into the political, and this has been my starting point for understanding the extent and nature of their feminism.

Of the two women Smith is the most overtly feminist in her writing and in terms of her political agenda. In her novels she repeatedly presents narratives of male violence, adultery, and fecklessness and women's oppression in marriage. Her publication of *Desmond* in the same year as Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* has excited much critical comparison, and several critics have termed the novel 'feminist' in its responses to the gender debates of the day. In Smith's poetry it is this same impulse to return to the private and public plight of women which confirms her place alongside the key feminist writers of the period. In her sonnets she reveals the disturbing subtext to Wollstonecraft's descriptions of the legal and political wrongs of women, and exhibits the psychological damage performed on women by patriarchal oppression. The prefaces which accompany these sonnets make clear that her psychological suffering is a direct consequence of a social system which allows her to be 'sold, a legal prostitute' by her father, and remind us of her economic and legal powerlessness before her husband and a legal system which enforces his rights, repeatedly describing herself and the 'affairs' of her family as being 'in the power of men'.⁸ In the 1790s this message takes on bolder social implications as she links her own plight to that of society's outcasts, the poor and the exiled, and she begins to formulate a more complex and socially aware attack on eighteenth century society. Nevertheless, it is to images of women suffering specifically as women, as mothers or lovers abandoned by individual men and oppressed by a patriarchal political system, that she returns again and again. This figuring of the lack of alternatives for the suffering woman resolves itself into a vision of the madness/death alternative as women's only available responses to their plight. This vision functions as a feminist political critique, but one which rejects the possibility of socio-political change put forward by feminists like Wollstonecraft, by pointing to women's lack of access to seats of power. Smith is actually more radical than Wollstonecraft both in her figuring of this set of choices and in her depiction of its consequences. She envisions female anger harnessing the power of nature, in

particular the mythologically feminised element of water, and invoking storms and floods to destroy patriarchal power.

While Barbauld is perceived by Polwhele to be the 'most conspicuous figure' in the 'Amazonian band' following Wollstonecraft's lead and termed a 'virago' by Horace Walpole, she is often perceived as anti-feminist by later critics because of her now infamous letters to Elizabeth Montagu and Maria Edgeworth, and her poem 'The Rights of Woman'.⁹ As I have argued however, these texts have been subject to a misreading which does not fully take into account the complex gender politics of the time at which they were written. What they actually reveal is Barbauld's awareness of the oppressions and ideological constraints under which eighteenth century women lived and worked. In both her letter to Elizabeth Montagu and the poem addressed to her brother, 'To Dr. Aikin on his Complaining that she Neglected him', Barbauld expresses bitterness at her exclusion from the formal seats of learning and at the restrictions placed on women's education, and critiques the notion of biological difference which validates this exclusion. Barbauld in fact expresses a complex and in some ways more modern feminist awareness than Smith in her challenging of the notions of exclusion on the grounds of biological sex, but also in her doubts as to the existence of a shared agenda on these same grounds. She rejects the separatism encapsulated in the ideology of separate spheres and challenges the expectations placed upon her to write in 'feminine' genres. Barbauld displays an awareness that the restrictions placed on women are cultural constructions not biological givens and as such can be challenged. She attacks stereotypical feminine roles both in her own brilliant interventions in politics and in the images of women in her poetry. In poems like 'The Rights of Woman' and 'Peace and Shepherd', she points to the destructive cultural constructions of women as 'beauteous nymphs' or as 'angel pure' which, the poems suggest, function to deny real social oppressions. Barbauld is at her most feminist in her critique of women's exclusion from science and other branches of learning. Unlike Smith, she challenges the social restrictions placed on her gender not through the force of her anger, but by a considered appropriation of intellect and reason for women. She presents us in her poetry with subversive images of women who combine gaiety and intellect, and who unsettle the complacent alignment of women with the domestic affections,

irrationality and sensibility. Barbauld's appropriation of discourses like astronomy suggest that she grasped at female learning in order to engender a fairly radical restructuring of the socio-political scene.

While Barbauld then tries to imagine realistic political change and to appropriate reason for women, Smith rejects reason in the face of debilitating depression and cannot envision actual social change. Instead her responses to social oppression consist of visions of anarchy and chaos brought on by female anger and despair. This crucial difference between the two women's political outlook comes across in their shared fascination with ruined empires in their late poems, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* and *Beachy Head*. Both writers take Volney's *Ruins of Empire* to its logical conclusion, imagining the collapse of Britain's imperial power. While Barbauld however, albeit doubtfully, tries to project hope for the progress of civilisation onto the New World, Smith is unwilling or unable to imagine any perpetuation of human civilisation, replacing this with images suggesting a return to a pre-civilised existence, with hermits and shepherds dwelling in the shells of the old symbols of power and in sea caves. Smith's vision must finally be seen as the most anarchic and transgressive of the two; a terrifying vision of how eighteenth century politics and society failed to answer the most fundamental needs of so many of its citizens especially, Smith suggests, its women. Despite this crucial difference it is the similarity of this shared vision of the ruins of power and empire with which this thesis should perhaps close. Barbauld and Smith's mutual fascination in their late work with an image of European civilisation in ruins remains the enduring image of their poetry and the focal point of this thesis. It suggests both their sense of political powerlessness in the society in which they lived and their need to project their deepest desires onto a future moment. Their shared judgement on the early nineteenth century British Empire, despite the differences in their visions of the final outcome, is that it was a decaying, corrupted, abusive, aggressive, and ultimately failed power structure which was no longer fit to retain its supreme position in world politics. This judgement speaks volumes both for the way in which this society denied and oppressed its female citizens, but also of the extent to which theirs is a deeply gendered vision.

Notes

¹ Nancy Hartsock, 'Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 157-75 (p. 160).

² Subtitle to 'The Emigrants', in *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 135.

³ *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by Lucy Aikin, 2 vols (London: Longman and others, 1825), II, p. 401.

⁴ See Barbauld's Hymns numbered I to XI, in *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994).

⁵ Stuart Curran, 'Romantic Poetry: Why and Wherefore?', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 216-35 (p. 230); Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 42.

⁶ Cited in Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 249.

⁷ Kathryn Sunderland, 'Hannah More's Counter-Revolutionary Feminism', in *Revolution in Writing: British Literary Responses to the French Revolution*, ed. by Kelvin Everest (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 27-63 (p. 27).

⁸ Charlotte Smith cited in 'Charlotte Smith's Emblematic Castles' by Loraine Fletcher, *Critical Survey*, 4:1 (1992), 3-8 (p. 4); Charlotte Smith, preface to *Desmond*,

ed. by Janet Todd and Antje Blank (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), pp. 5-8 (p. 6).

⁹ Richard Polwhele, *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem Addressed to the Author of the Pursuits of Literature* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1798), p. 16 and p. 6; *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. by W. S. Lewis and A. Dayle Wallace, 33 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press and London: Oxford University Press, 1944), XI (p. 169).

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